

Being Everything: Eggynack's Comprehensive Druid Handbook

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The Basics

Here's where it all begins, your journey into the world of druids. It is a world filled with ridiculously overpowered things that had no business existing, and with more bookkeeping than you can conceivably shake a stick at. Here, in this section, will be covered the basics. Those aspects of a druid that are either all encompassing, necessary for understanding what makes a druid a druid, or relatively simple, coming down to the very first stages of character building.

Introduction

So, you're a druid. Maybe you're not. Maybe you're just thinking about becoming a druid, or you're seeking support for some druid based argument you're making, or you just like reading novel length disquisitions on D&D classes, for fun value. Either way, druids. So, what is a druid? Wait, let me break out the big text for this one.

What is a Druid?

Well, to put it simply, a druid is everything. They can be a massive beat-stick, the party scout, and use diplomacy on a leader of a small town, and can do all of those things at the same time. In other words, they're a standard tier one, capable of doing just about anything you could possibly think of, and a few things besides. Oftentimes, someone will come forth with a supposed weakness of the druid, thinking that they fall far short in versatility when compared to other tier ones, only managing their rank through sheer enemy bashing capability, only to find that their sought after ability is easily accessible.

How Hard are Druids?

This is a question that's surprisingly difficult to answer, as it's one that can be approached in a couple of different directions, and the approaches yield different answers. In one sense, druids are the easiest class in the game. Some say that all you need to do to build a competent druid is take natural spell at 6th level, and have enough wisdom to cast your spells. They're wrong. You don't even need the natural spell part. Give a competent player a druid, whose feats are all toughness, whose animal companion is a pony, who is wild shaped into also a pony, and whose spell slots are filled with detect poison, and they'll utterly destroy the game.

In that very round, they'll be able to either turn into some defensive flying creature, or into their natural form, if they lack natural spell, in the next they'll spontaneously

convert one of those crappy spells into a massive beatstick, and in 24 hours, that pony companion will be a fleshraker dinosaur, and their spell slots will be up to snuff. The character in question will go from what is likely the worst in the party, to one of the best, without relying on anything except standard class features. Moreover, to some extent, playing a druid right just means making fullest use of your class features. As long as you pay all of your abilities the proper respect, you should be fine.

At the same time, the druid is also one of the hardest classes in the game. Just getting started in the class requires a thorough understanding of the monster rules, and actually playing it often necessitates creating character sheets for all of your many summons, wild shape forms, and animal companions, making the druid one of the most bookkeeping intensive classes out there. Druids are also full casters, who have constant access to piles of intensely complicated spells. It could even be said that some spells, like summon nature's ally IV, have more play complexity than some entire classes.

Druids, more than just about any other class out there, reward knowledge. Every book in the game that contains monsters or spells, which is a lot of them, is a potential resource. That's in addition to the rewards afforded to other classes from knowledge, like feats or items. This may even be more true for druids than for something like a wizard. Wizards are limited to some extent by their spellbook, and their ability to transform or summon is similarly limited by preparation. By contrast, a druid could go to sleep after a day of nothing but core spells, wake up, and toss out spells from obscure source books. Similarly, druids pretty much always have access to their summoning and transformation, so an increase in knowledge could pay off within six seconds in-game. It's a bit harrowing, really.

What Sourcebooks Does this Handbook Use?

Just about anything first party, which in this case includes everything from setting specific materials to dragon magazine, setting the line between those and works not endorsed by wizards. It could be said that there is less of a point in putting down build resources from truly obscure materials, because fewer games are going to be able to actually make use of that information, but I posit that the inverse is true. I could create a handbook out of nothing but material on the scale of entangle, riding dogs, and natural spell, but there would be less point in that, as a good number of people already know about those things, and as the information is freely available through a basic Google search. Thus, this handbook does have stuff right out of the PHB I, because those things are often incredibly important, and because pretty much everyone who plays the game makes use of that book, but that information sits right alongside things from the completes, and setting specific books, and even web articles from before 3.5 existed. Granted, there is a downside to that approach, in that a good amount of the information in this handbook could be completely irrelevant to your particular game, but it's better to have the information and not need it, than it is to need the information and not have it.

Why is this Handbook Necessary?

If you've researched druids prior to finding this handbook, then you might have noticed that druids already have handbooks. Like, a lot of them. If you haven't come across any of them in your druid themed travels, then you can always check the acknowledgement section for a reasonable list. However, in some ways, those handbooks are unsatisfactory. This isn't a shot across the rhetorical bow of high optimization, because I made some good use of those handbooks, including in the construction of this one, but, y'know, maybe it's best to just give an example. Druid handbooks generally just don't have a section on prestige classes. Sure, you might see a, "Planar shepherds kick ass," of some variety, but rarely anything substantive beyond that. This handbook, if it isn't obvious from context, does have such a section.

What really got me into the idea of writing this handbook, however, was the spell

list, along with, oddly enough, the ACF list. The latter was the first thing I ever wrote in this handbook, as a matter of fact. For spells, I noticed (using my sharp, falcon-like gaze) that the descriptions were mostly only a sentence in length, and worse yet, lists and descriptions alike were copied across just about every handbook (a fact made obvious by errors like the 1d6 damage/level listed in association with dessicate, which show up in all of them). As for ACF's, the existing handbooks barely mentioned them, which was annoying to me, because I wanted to know all about that stuff.

Ultimately, if there is one goal to this handbook, it is piles of information. Just massive descriptions, often spreading across multiple pages, of everything a druid could ever want. If you're seeking concision and/or brevity then it's possible that you're in the wrong place, but if you read an entry in this handbook, then it's likely that you'll know everything that you need to know about the entry in question. This handbook is, as the title says, comprehensive, and it's not for the faint of heart, extending several times longer than any other druid handbook that I'm aware of, but I suspect that, if you read through a decent amount of this monstrosity, then you will end up knowing a whole hell of a lot about druids.

Being Everything

One of the major driving questions of this handbook, perhaps the most major, is whether a druid can do everything. Can a druid just fill every role with impunity, often multiple roles at once, crushing all lesser classes in his wake? The short answer is yes. Worst case scenario, druids have shapechange on their list, and that covers just about everything, and if that's not good enough, planar shepherd can do just about anything you can imagine. So, handbook over. Throw out your druid themed beverages on your way out (Koka-Koala? I don't know).

The longer answer, however, is that not all solutions are created equal. To return to those cited examples, shapechange requires that you be ridiculously high level, and planar shepherd requires a bunch of levels in an obscure and obviously overpowered prestige class which should be booted from most games. If a druid can only do something in that last tiny percentage of the game, or when taking that

trick from large quantities of progression in a class that's practically theoretical optimization all on its own, that druid can barely be said to be capable of that thing at all. Thus, there are really two critical parameters in determining how useful a given option is in allowing a druid to be all of the things: level and steps.

Level is basic and intuitive. If you can do something starting at level one, then you can always do it. It's just part of your repertoire. If you can only do something at level twenty, then you can almost never do it, and it's only really worth consideration if it's ridiculously powerful. Between those two points, obviously, is a whole spectrum of levels at which you can gain various abilities. The goal then, along these lines, is obviously to get that level as low as possible. If you want to charm someone, then the hope is that you'll be able to do it before you hit level nine and gain access to nixie summoning for charm person.

Steps, or to expand on that, the number of steps from basic druid, is a bit more complicated. Basically, take a perfectly blank druid, with all of his feats spent on stuff like skill focus (underwater basket weaving), and without PrC's of any kind. How many roles can that druid fill? The answer is a whole hell of a lot, on the basis of spells, summoning, the animal companion, and wild shape, and that set of stuff is all zero steps from druid. I can pretty much just assume, all the way through the internet, that you have all of that stuff, because it comes default. Maybe natural spell is half a step from druid, because just about everyone takes it, and perhaps a level in contemplative choosing an exact domain is a few steps away, because a very small percentage of druids are going to do that. I don't have a perfect number here for everything, let alone any sort of formula, but the basic idea is very important. While a druid can fill any role, it's pretty difficult for a given druid to fill all roles at once, and the more steps a role is away from druid, the higher the cost of choosing that role over another fewer steps away.

Chances are you won't have to fill every role. Your party might have some source of mighty beat-stickery, or plane shift, or divinations, or whatever. Just having some other full caster cuts down on the amount you should do tremendously, and if there's some character focused on a particular role, you should likely stay away

from that role, because taking that role is both redundant and somewhat impolite. This handbook can't assume the existence of any such character though. I can't just handwave the potential need for a party face, based on the idea that someone will cover it. For the purposes of this handbook, the general assumption is that you're on your own, or to be more accurate, that you're in a party with about three commoners. That premise is unlikely to match any real game, but the way I figure it, if you can handle any problem with nothing but commoners by your side, then you can handle anything that happens in the game you play.

A Note on Bias

The ideal, in the construction of this handbook is a work perfectly objective, lacking in any sort of bias. Unfortunately, this ideal is likely an unattainable one. I will, by my very nature, prefer certain sorts of things to others, even if those things aren't necessarily the best option. Thus, here I will list some of those preferred and not-preferred things, such that what is written may be taken with an explicitly stated grain of salt. I like value in all things, and if I see a thing that is apparently high in efficiency, then that is a thing I'll enjoy. I like screwing with the action economy, at least somewhat, because it's just a nifty thing. I like battlefield control and summoning effects, and in particular I like filling up the battlefield with a pile of marginal advantages until a battle tips in my favor.

I dislike 10 minutes/level spells, because they just seem awkward, and maybe minutes/level spells to a lesser extent, while I like anything hours/level and above. I dislike personal druid beatstickery plans, and like highly defensive casting plans. I dislike widely known cheese, and like finding ways for druids to do stuff that people don't think they can do. By the same token, I like weird druid necromancy plans for some reason. I like wacky crap, and more than one object is in this handbook purely on the basis of personal amusement. Also, I like druids, though that should probably be obvious.

The Rating Guide

This handbook makes use of four ratings: **teal**, **blue**, **black**, and **red**.

Teal indicates an option that is straightforwardly one of the best in the entire game. These range from so fundamental that you'd have to be insane to not use them (natural spell), to so incredibly broken that you would have to be insane to use them (planar shepherd). Generally speaking, the only way for a game object to end up **teal** is if there's nothing significantly better within its category.

Blue indicates an option with a great quantity of power. While not quite on the level of **teal** options, you can basically never go wrong making use of one of these. Most of the best game objects druids can use are going to wind up in this category, though, if it has a strong tendency to break the game in half, it's liable to wind up getting shunted up a rank.

Black indicates an option with normal levels of power, which you should consider using on your druid, but which you shouldn't feel especially pressured into. This is where most options land, and many of them are going to be quite powerful, because you're a druid, and everything you do is powerful. There's a pretty big range here, from things that might be highly useful in a particular situation, to things that are just standard staple options which offer no real risk of breaking the game in half.

Red is a special category, with a meaning somewhat different than that of its fellow ratings. I mean, obviously it means bad, because folks tend to have basic pattern recognition abilities, but the important question here is why the category exists at all. This handbook's primary purpose is to find the good stuff, after all, those delectable chunks of mechanical meat that make a druidy life worth living, and there are probably some marginally better things that I could be listing instead. The answer is that red usually indicates something which is very much bad, but also popular. Maybe I've seen it asked about by an endeavoring druid player, or maybe

I've seen it recommended by a helpful forum folk, or maybe I've even seen it given a good review by other handbooks. Thus, the goal is less to say, "This is bad," and more to say, "No, this is not good." There are also a few sections where I've just listed every available option, like ACF's and initiate feats, and in those cases there will inevitably be some bad ratings. As for the information you should divine from such a rating, red indicates that you should avoid the hell out of these things, unless you're specifically attempting to play down to the power level of the other party members.

Filling Roles

While vague generalities about how good druids are at filling various roles is nice in a distant sort of way, at some point you have to get down to brass tacks and start actually filling them. Doing so is, after all, one of the overriding macro goals of this guide. To that end, here is a list of major roles, how good druids are at filling them, and some cursory details about how best to fill them. These roles will be drawn from [Person Man's Niche Ranking System](#).

Battlefield Control: Out of all the things you can do with your spells, battlefield control is possibly the best. The druid list is filled to the brim with excellent spells of this variety, from entangle, impeding stones, and wall of smoke at low levels, to control winds, blizzard, and early earthquakes at moderate levels, to reverse gravity and, actually, probably more earthquakes at high levels. This is backed up by the fact that druids are one of the best classes at filling the battlefield with creatures of various types, which intrinsically acts to control things.

Buffer: While druids do have on their list a wide array of buff spells, druids tend to fall a bit short when it comes to ally buffering because their spell list is a little on the selfish side. The best druid buffs are either self targeted, or hit only animals, leaving the party fighter out of the buff action. Still, the druid list isn't entirely lacking in this field, and spells like energy immunity, and superior resistance, can

be used on anyone. Beyond that, while it's not quite as party friendly, hitting up yourself and your animal friends with magic has a pretty similar impact to using those spells on your allies, and spells like heart of X, bite of the wereX, and animal growth are excellent buffs.

Debuffer: The druid list tends more towards big battlefield control spells than targeted debuffs, but there are nonetheless enough gems there to make this a role you can take on. Two of the best are that second level duo of kelpstrand and blinding spittle, and options abound, from moon bolt to baleful polymorph. That is, by a decent margin, your best way to apply debuffs, but it's certainly not the only way. The odd animal companion, like the swindlespitter, has a debuff ability, and the same is true of a good variety of wild shape forms. The latter is especially true if you take aberration or dragon wild shape, as both have a good variety of debuffs to their name. Debuffing is unlikely to be the main thing you do in combat, but you can do some serious work with that sort of effect.

Dominator: While you can certainly control minds better than, say, a fighter, this is just not a role that the druid list is tuned for. Therefore, you basically just have to add mind control spells to your list by various means, whether through things like contemplative, or initiate feats. The few things you have access to natively are either ludicrously overleveled, like nixie summoning, or weirdly awful, like dominate animal. Still, druids are capable of pushing themselves in this direction if you so desire, and realistically, this niche is only really available to a rather small percent of classes. This is one of the worse druid roles, but that doesn't mean you can't be decent at it.

Face: The biggest and most obvious thing here is that you have diplomacy on your skill list, and boosting up charisma as a tertiary stat to support that gives you a reasonable face all on its own. Druids do have other good face resources, however. Wild empathy allows you to extend your diplomacy along the animal axis, or, if you prefer, you can swap that out for the voice of the city ACF to get speak language as a class skill and some other capacity to expand your pool of targets. The best way to build a face, though, is likely through half-orc substitution levels, which

simultaneously adds intimidate to your list, boosting your number of face skills to two, and allows you to apply your possibly large from wild shape strength modifier to wild empathy rolls instead of charisma.

Of course, all of that build stuff is backed up by spells, albeit not in a far reaching way. Speak with animals/plants/everything broadens the scope of face targets in the same way that wild empathy and voice of the city do, and along those same lines it's possible to get tongues through dragon wild shape. You also get divine presence for an intimidate bonus, which helps either on its own or with half-orc granted intimidate access. In terms of direct persuasion, charm person and similar spells aren't directly on the druid list, but there are some ways, ranging from the obscure summon fey, to the high level SNA V for a nixie, to the build intensive greensinger initiate/domain adders, to cast them indirectly. As a result of all of those scattered elements, the druid can take on the face role in a party if needed, though you're not going to be as good at it as the more face focused classes.

Game Changer: Largely through the use of magic, druids are very skilled when it comes to reshaping the world to their liking. Perhaps the best example of this is their command over the weather, with control winds, blizzard, earthquake, and fimbulwinter all allowing blunt manipulation of reality. Things need not be so unsubtle, however. Druids have a wide variety of spells and effects that allow you to permanently create, change, or destroy solid objects. These include stone shape, stone metamorphosis, wall of X, the world sundering rockburst, and rust monster/dragon form, all things with profound long term impact. And, of course, no talk of druid brokenness would be complete without the inclusion of that fantastic wealth by level destroying engine that is wall of salt. If you can't come up with some way to change the game with that much money, you're just doing things wrong.

Healer: While the druid isn't on quite the same level as the cleric in this arena, you're basically the next best thing. You have a lot of the same sorts of spells on your list, ranging from status removal, in the form of panacea, to raising the dead, in the form of reincarnate, to standard HP healing, through cure and vigor spells.

You even have something of an advantage in that last arena, as spontaneously summoned unicorns offer a fantastic spell to HP exchange rate. For comparison's sake, a 7th level cleric is spontaneously casting cure critical wounds for an average of 25 points of healing, while unicorn spontaneously pulled from the same slot heals 42.5 points on average. All in all, a druid can easily slot himself into the role of healer if that's a thing they want to do.

Meat Shield: The druid is basically a class formed from the ground up by an interlocking web of meatshields. Animal companions are just about the perfect meat shield, as they are far more disposable than a normal melee character, and summons would be even better for the role if they didn't eat up both time and magic. Even the druid is capable of directly filling this role, as it's not all that difficult to pump AC and HP sky high with a relatively small investment of daily and build resources respectively. For AC, you generally want luminous armor, a defensive wild shape form like desmodu hunting bat, and maybe a monk's belt combined with standard issue wisdom boosters, and for HP, you usually just want lots of constitution, with half-orc substitution levels pushing you even further if you really want this role. The overall result is that a druid can be something like four or five high powered defensive bodies at once, and that's a thing that few other classes can claim.

Melee Damage: This is of the most obvious things for a druid to do, and just about any druid can slot into this role at any moment. Without any real long term investment, your animal companion, summons, and wild shape form can be spontaneously brought to bear, and while each of those melee sources isn't necessarily on par with an optimized melee character, the overall gestalt can put you right at the top of the list. With investment, usually in the form of buff spells and powerful druid feats (not the standard combat ones, but the ones that boost druid class features in ways conducive to combat), each of those elements can potentially go right over the top of those optimized melee characters. The overall impact is a pile of very powerful melee scattered all over the battlefield.

Mobility: On a tactical level, druid mobility comes almost entirely from wild shape.

Wild shape grants access to every movement mode that exists, in forms that range from the quite good, as is the case with the desmodu hunting bat's 60 ft. (good) flight speed, to the absolutely ridiculous, as with the mercury dragon's 250 ft. (good) flight speed. It also relies a bit on magic, as spells provide some speed boosters, like snowshoes, some early game movement modes, like winged watcher, and even the occasional piece of tactical teleportation, like shuffle (wild shape can grant crazy tactical teleportation too, with investment, if you pick up blink dog form from exalted wild shape). On the strategic side, things are mostly spell based, with high level teleportation options like stormwalk and master form, along with a bit of planeshift fueled by animate with the spirit, though until you hit those levels, your distant travel is going to look a lot like your combat travel, based on the movement modes you gain through wild shape. With a vast range of movement based abilities across every level, the druid ranks at just about the top of the list when it comes to getting around quickly.

Ranged Damage: While the druid doesn't have a massive number of ranged options, there are at least some. On the mundane side, things are usually limited to sling use, with perhaps the occasional animal companion or wild shape form with a ranged attack, though you can beef up your weapon use some if you use elf as a race, or make use of the environmental weapons list ACF from dragon magazine, to make your proficiencies better on the cheap. On the magic side, things get somewhat better, as the druid list has some surprising high notes when it comes to blasting. These include, but are definitely not limited to, produce flame at first, splinterbolt at second, call lightning at third, and a personal favorite, boreal wind at fourth. Thus, the resources are definitely there if you want to directly kill stuff at range, even if getting you or your minions up close and personal is a more common approach.

Sage: The druid list is not one that offers massive access to information, at least as compared to the cleric or wizard list, but you do have some solid divination based resources if you want them. Scrying effects are a big one, with your access somewhat superior to that of most, and you also have spells like omen of peril, circle dance, lay of the land, and commune with nature. You even have indirect

access to augury through using animate with the spirit for a moanic deva. And, of course, there are always things like a contemplative or divine oracle dip, standing by to broaden your divination access if you so choose. As a result, druids are privy to a good range of information, enough to act as a serious boon to a party, even if that range is significantly smaller than that of some classes.

Scout: The most obvious druid asset when it comes to scouting is access to both spot and listen on your skill list, backed by a primary wisdom focus. Also on the mundane side of things, you're always backed by an animal companion, which will usually have scent, and a second set of eyes at the very least. On the more magical side, there are a few spells that help with hide and spot alike, such as camouflage and wild instincts, and enhance wild shape, perhaps backed by aberration wild shape, offers a vast array of vision modes, topping out at stuff like the dolgaunt's 360 ft. blindsight, and the phaerimm elder's true seeing. Dragon wild shape also offers some options along these same lines, and without even the need for a spell. If you'd like, you can even use a summoned creature to scout for you, with the janni's invisibility and telepathy offering one of the best options. Taken as a whole, all of this stuff makes druids really excellent at knowing what's going on around them, and thus allows you to be a successful scout.

Summoner: With spontaneous access to a wide array of beefy and occasionally utility possessing creatures, the druid makes for one of the best summoning classes in the entire game. Without any investment, either on a character basis or day to day, you're near the top of the field, and between feats like greenbound summoning and rashemi elemental summoning, items like the ring of the beast, and ACF's like shifter substitution levels, the returns from investment are vast. Meanwhile, the druid also has access to some long term minions, with the animal companion basically filling this role, and with spells like fey ring, animate with the spirit and valorous steed, alongside odd wild shape based minions from stuff like myconid sovereign form, really granting access to an army. The druid is one of the big summoning classes for a reason, and it's a fantastic option if you want to go that route.

Thief: While it's certainly not a main druid role, owing to a lack of hide and move silently on your list on one side, and a lack of spells like invisibility on the other, there are some tools to enhance druidic sneakery. For one thing, you can just get all of that stuff I just said, the former through either nightbringer initiate or halfling druid substitution levels, and the latter either through picking up domains or using one of the dragon wild shape forms that grants it. Druids are party to some less conventional tools, however. Inconspicuous wild shape forms are a traditional method of evading enemy vision, and if you want to do things in a more interesting fashion, there are also forms that combine efficient burrowing with tremorsense. As with scouting, you also have some spells that improve stealth skills, like one with the land and camouflage. Thus, in spite of the lack of obvious tools, druids can stealth about and steal things relatively well.

Trapfinder: Druids just aren't all that great when it comes to finding and disabling traps the traditional way. It is fortunate, then, that they're pretty decent at finding and disabling traps in non-traditional ways. In this case, that means using the animal companion, combined with summons both normal and of the elemental reserve feat variety, as well as the occasional casting of wood wose, to go ahead of the party and kill traps with their oh so disposable faces. It's not perfect by any means, both because it eats a lot of resources, and because it doesn't always hit the traps you need it to, but it does the job well enough if no one in the party is built for it.

Ability Scores

Ability scores don't exactly work the same on a druid as they do on a non-druid. For most classes, you assign your stats, and that's just what your stats are. If you take low strength, then you're just not going to be that great at whacking folks with a big stick, and low dexterity means that you're just going to have to go second more of the time. For druids though, that's not the case, due to wild shape and the animal companion. Wild shape is the more obvious cause of this phenomenon, out of the two, directly substituting your physical stats for those of another creature, and more importantly, doing so over durations that make those changed stats your effective primaries. The animal companion is pretty important too, however, as no matter how low you drop your stats, it always holds on to that static stat block.

This has some interesting ramifications on the rest of the game. The main result is that druids are a ridiculously single ability dependent, or SAD, class, verging on no ability dependent. This is one of the few classes in the game that can function off of nothing but 10's and 11's, capable of keeping up with casting at all levels but three with a focus on stat boosting, and a druid can even run on all 8's, assuming you use a race (like anthropomorphic bat) to boost your wisdom. However, as a corollary to that, a druid doesn't get much out of increasing base strength or dexterity, meaning that they need to use non-inherent bonuses to increase those stats. As a result of those factors, it is best to assign your base stats, as well as possible racial mods, as indicated below.

Strength: Strength is terrible after you get wild shape, because it gets replaced. It's merely quite bad before you get wild shape, because hitting enemies in the face isn't the best use of your time.

Dexterity: This stat also gets replaced in a wild shape, so it's not worth taking, but it's alright before you get wild shape. Initiative and armor class are rather important, after all, as are ranged (touch) attack spells. Notably, dexterity gets somewhat better if you boost it in a non-inherent fashion, with an item or something, so that it sticks around.

Constitution: Wild shape doesn't change your HP, so this stat is about as great for you as it is for everyone else. It's technically a bit worse, because wild shape means that constitution won't affect your fortitude saves and concentration check, but you're so SAD that you're still raising constitution higher than most classes. Constitution is never going to be as important as wisdom, but it's still a very useful thing to have.

Intelligence: This is a great tertiary druid stat. Druids get a pretty solid skill list, which can be altered in several easily accessible ways, so you're never going to want for things to put points into.

Wisdom: This is your stat. It makes you better at casting spells, and casting spells is the thing you do that is most governed by stats, so put your points here. Wisdom is pretty good outside of that main aspect too, increasing your will saves to crazy levels, granting solid scouting ability if you want it, and as you're increasing the stat anyway, possibly boosting your AC by a lot with a monk's belt.

Charisma: Druids have diplomacy on their list, along with wild empathy, so if you want to be the party face, you can pull that off reasonably well. You can also pick up intimidate through half-orc substitution levels, so if you're going that route, this might be slightly better. Charisma is somewhat worse than intelligence, but it can make a solid tertiary stat if you so desire.

Class Features

This, right here, is you. The stuff that makes you a druid, the place where all that crazy power begins, is in this section. A few of your class features are amazing and game defining, your spells, your summoning, your animal companion, and later your wild shape. These class features will have entire massive sections devoted to them, and optimizing them is key to your power. The rest range from bad to decent, and while there is room to optimize some of them, and while they are relevant factors of power, there won't be as much about them. It's worth note, however, that while these are relatively weak things to push effort into in general, their low impact makes them ideal for swapping with ACF's, so it's well worth checking the ACF section of the handbook if one or more of them doesn't interest you.

Weapon Proficiencies: Druids have a pretty sparse weapon list, but before you get wild shape, which also happens to be before you have enough spells to cast all the time, these are going to be the way you participate in an encounter in most rounds. You're not going to be carrying around any greatswords or longbows, but any weapon is better than no weapon.

Quarterstaff: On its own, the quarterstaff is going to be inferior to most weapon options, but it benefits from unparalleled spell support, including shillelagh, spikes, and entangling staff, and the fact that each side can have its own enchantments means that you can get an array of more utility oriented enchantments on the cheap. Thus, if you want to go the buff+weapon attack route, then the quarterstaff should be right up your alley.

Scimitar: Due to the regular occurrence of low strength mods on druids, sword and board, or even one handed fighting, can be a perfectly viable option. If you do go this route, then you get damage comparable to what a

spear provides, along with the modest advantages provided by a free hand. If there is a real disadvantage to the scimitar, leaving aside the outside possibility of a high strength druid, it's the 15 GP cost. The spear, the next most expensive weapon option listed here, costs a little over an eighth as much, and that's before factoring in the shield. This might not seem like a big deal, but it's a factor at early levels, and that's when you actually care about this stuff. If you can afford this fighting style, then it might be the best aside from sling use, but don't go too far out of your way for it.

Sling: Slings are slow and low in damage, but they also work at range, and are crazy cheap, and that's enough to make this the best weapon in your arsenal. At the earliest levels, your best defense is going to be standing where enemies are not, behind your noble riding dog, and from that position, ranged attacks are invaluable.

Spear: This is the generic melee weapon of choice, especially if you have a positive strength mod. The damage is higher than on other druid melee weapons, and two-handing is one of the best ways to melee. If you have reason to go with a different weapon, feel free to do so, but spears are solid.

Armor and Shield Proficiencies: Druids are limited to light or medium non-metal armor, and non-tower wooden shields, which is a shallow pool, but still quite serviceable. The costs associated with using armor with wild shape, and the power of luminous armor, mean that you may be better off leaving your proficiencies behind entirely at that point, but that still leaves you four or five levels of armor use. The baseline here is either leather or studded leather armor, providing +2 and +3 AC respectively at low cost. Even if you don't especially care about AC, these options are cheap enough to be well worth using. Depending on your weapon of choice you can also pick up a light or heavy wooden shield for another point or two of AC, again with a very low GP cost.

However, if you do care about AC to a greater degree, then they are by no means the only mundane sources you can make use of. Elven darkleaf (A&EG, 19) is

essentially the druidic equivalent of mithral, reducing heavy and medium armors by a weight class, and generally acting as a non-metal version of metal armors, with a material cost of +750 GP for light and +3,000 GP for heavy. This enables the use of either chain shirt, if you want to stick with something light and relatively cheap, or something bigger like full plate if you want to go deep. Notably, the chain shirt option can also be improved by way of a dastana and chahar-aina (OA, 75), for 25 GP for the first and 75 GP for the second, providing +1 AC each, and reinforced (Dragon Magazine #358, 42) can be added to either option for an additional +1, costing 800 GP for light and 1,200 GP for heavy. While this setup isn't nearly as free as the standard leather options, they do demonstrate that you can go a long way with these proficiencies at reasonable cost, whether such a choice is effective in the long run or not.

Saving Throws: The druid save setup, with good will and fortitude and bad reflex, is nearly perfect. Will saves and fortitude saves are generally the most dangerous you can face, often taking your life, or even your mind, while reflex saves tend to just deal damage. Moreover, your stats blend in with those saves very well, as druids tend to have the highest wisdom of just about any class, and often very high constitution. The latter is somewhat tricky, however, as is dexterity for reflex saves, as wild shape replaces both scores, but you can get some pretty high values from wild shape, so it's probably a good thing. You even have a great array of buffs, with everything from owl's insight to superior resistance boosting saves massively.

Spells (1st): This is you. At its essence, beyond all of the feats you choose, the forms you take, or the animal companion you have, a druid is defined by their spells. Perfect spell selection doesn't mean as much to you as it does to other full casters, because of spontaneous summons and your other class features, but it's still the most important facet of your character. Choose wisely, and choose well.

Spontaneous Casting (1st): This is one of a druid's most important abilities. Summon nature's ally is a spell that is useful in just about any situation, and is excellent in some situations. Spontaneous conversion is what gives you the freedom to prepare situational spells, like wind wall, under the assumption that you can

convert those situational spells if the situation never comes up. Summoning is great on its own, and if you build your character towards it, summoning can be amazing. A druid who is familiar with their summoning list is a druid who will never be caught off guard.

Bonus Languages (1st): Druids get to speak druidic for free, which means that you get to speak in your secret druid language at druid parties while the wizards look on in jealousy. It's certainly an ability of some kind, and it's nifty that you have it, but it could easily see absolutely no use in a game. You also add sylvan to your language options, if it's not there already, which is decent due to the several summonable creatures that speak sylvan.

Animal Companion (1st): After spells and wild shape, this is a druid's most powerful class feature. An animal companion means that you can tank for the party, even when you're flying high up in the air and shooting lightning bolts at your enemy. It gives you a kill condition when inevitability is on your side due to infinitely layered BFC. It gives you a friendly buff target, no matter what the rest of your party looks like. It means that you're always at least a fighter, even when you're standing in the middle of a dead magic zone. It means that you're always two characters, while everyone else is running around with one. The animal companion is generally at its best at level one, when fighters are still a passable class, and as they lose their melee edge, the druid becomes powerful enough to not care. Remember that you can swap these out on a day's notice, and enjoy the power of the mighty animal companion.

Nature Sense (1st): Get a +2 on knowledge (nature) and survival checks. Knowledge (nature) is incredibly important for druids, because it determines your familiarity with wild shape forms. Survival is less important, but it's a nice skill to have a boost in.

Wild Empathy (1st): This lets you use diplomacy on animals. Wild empathy isn't an especially powerful ability, but it's one of several factors that can allow a druid to adopt the role of face with some effectiveness.

Woodland Stride (2nd): This lets you move uninhibited and undamaged through non-magical undergrowth. Woodland stride is halfway useful if it comes up, because moving normally through difficult terrain can be a great tactical aid sometimes. Most spells don't interact with this, but briar web (SpC, 39) does, and that's pretty nifty. It's not the best spell, but running around freely in your own BFC is a rather enjoyable thing to do.

Trackless Step (3rd): This causes you to not leave tracks in natural surroundings if you so choose. This is one of those abilities that I can't see having much use, particularly because druids tend to travel in parties with people who can be tracked. Thus, this is only really useful in a scouting mission, except I can't see it having much use either, because druids aren't all that good at scouting until they get wild shape, and by that point you're generally going to be flying. Woodland stride is an ability situational enough that I could imagine just forgetting about it on the one occasion the situation comes up.

Resist Nature's Lure (4th): You get a +4 on saving throws against the spell-like abilities of fey. This is a rather useless ability. Fey is a rare creature type, so it's very possible that you can go a whole campaign without encountering one. I advise trading this ability out with an ACF, like iron constitution. If there's anything good about this ability, it's that you can get some decent abilities by giving it up.

Wild Shape (5th): You get to become animals of various sizes and HD's, until level 12 when you get access to plant forms, and finally level 16 where you get access to elemental forms. There's a whole heaping section about ideal wild shape forms, so I'll leave the specifics to that part of the handbook. The important thing to know is that this is the second or third most powerful ability druids get access to. Wild shape is, at its essence, an extremely versatile and powerful all day buff. Wild shape changes your strength and dexterity (Also your constitution, but your HP stays the same), so you get to ignore those scores, even if you want to eventually punch folks (And you probably won't until you get wild shape, so it all works out). Wild shape lets a druid exist with perfect comfort on land, sea, air, or anywhere in

between. Moreover, you can switch from one form to another with a standard action, which is yet another factor which bumps a druid's moment to moment versatility by a tremendous amount.

Much like in the case of summoning, this is an ability that heavily rewards system knowledge, because the only real limit on your ability to become any animal of an appropriate size is you having read the right book. Learn about new forms, write up character sheets for each one, and come to the game prepared to use them. There's usually a few best forms at any point in your druidic career, but getting an edge by knowing the more situational forms can make all the difference.

Natural Spell (6th): You lose your 6th level feat, and gain the ability to cast spells in a wild shape. This isn't technically a class feature, but it might as well be one. Natural spell is the ability that turns wild shape from a once in a while utility/combat ability into the fantastic all day buff that it is. If you're not taking this feat, then stop not taking this feat and start taking this feat. A good portion of this handbook is going to assume that you do so.

Wild Shape, Large (8th): While medium forms definitely offer some combat utility, mostly in the form of the fleshraker dinosaur, large forms are where face beatery really comes into its own. These forms, for the most part, hit harder, take hits better, make superior use of combat maneuvers, and just generally consume the rhetorical face.

Venom Immunity (9th): You become immune to all poisons, magical or otherwise. This is nice if you want to harvest poison from your various animal friends, but otherwise this is just going to come up when it comes up. Venom immunity covers a decent amount of stuff, so it's nice to have, but it's not going to change your life, and there's not all that much you can do to make it more powerful than it is in its base state.

Wild Shape, Tiny (11th): There's not much in the way of tiny forms that are worth it on this basis of form granted stats/abilities alone, so for the most part, tiny

wild shape is just about making you tiny. That's not such a bad thing either. Sometimes you just need to be tiny, whether you're trying to stealth about, or blend in, or even fit into a small area.

Wild Shape, Plant (12th): Plant forms are where things get weird. Animal forms tend to conform to some basic expectations, with basic abilities and combat maneuvers, but once you get into plant forms, you start getting access to weird abilities, like plant zombies, or melee attacks with a 60 ft. range, or double-use of psi-like abilities. Without form adding feats/abilities, plant forms are easily the most esoteric you have access to, and some of them are well worth using.

A Thousand Faces (13th): You gain the ability to change your appearance at will, as if you were casting *disguise self*. A thousand faces provides some decent utility, especially if you're trying to act as the party face. As a 13th level ability, this comes a bit late to really change the game, especially because it doesn't work in a wild shape, but it can see some use if you want it to.

Wild Shape, Huge (15th): This could basically be renamed dire tortoise wild shape, and said name would be reasonably accurate. It's a form that just stands head and shoulders above everything a druid has access to natively, as well as most things a druid has access to by other means. There are other forms worth mentioning, and they thus see mention, but dire tortoise wild shape on its own is easily a **blue** ability.

Timeless Body (15th): You no longer take ability score penalties from aging, and can't be aged magically. If you're starting the game out at or near 15th level, there's little reason to not just age your character to venerable for the free points. Apart from that, timeless body doesn't really give you all that much outside of cool value.

Wild Shape, Elemental (16th): Elemental forms sound like they would be quite useful, but in reality they're rather underwhelming. At best, you're getting a basic upgrade on the things you're already doing with animal forms, and at worst you're

not even getting that upgrade.

Wild Shape, Huge Elemental (20th): Here's your big capstone, and it's basically just elemental wild shape made marginally more powerful. In other words, nice to have, but not great. If you don't get it due to prestige classing out, then it's very far from a big deal.

Dead Level Abilities

In that weird space between variant rules and class features, there are the [dead level abilities](#), a set of class features designed to fill the gaps in classes that have no class features at certain levels. This is pertinent for druids because they get two of these abilities, woodland sprint at 17th (where 9th level spells apparently weren't enough), and repel nature's lure at 19th. Woodland sprint is an upgrade to woodland stride, allowing you to ignore magical thorns, briars, and overgrown areas. This ability is quite useful, if a bit less so because of the high level abilities it's competing with, because druids have a bunch of spells that produce thorns, briars, and overgrown areas, such as wall of thorns. With this in hand, you can move through such effects with impunity, taking even greater advantage of their presence on the battlefield than you could when they were hitting everyone equally. Repel nature's lure, meanwhile, is akin to resist nature's lure before it, in that it's highly mediocre. This ability grants spell resistance of 10 plus your druid level against fey used spell-like abilities, a thing which, again, is both highly situational and weak as a defense against its few targets. Notably, neither ability seems to strictly rely on the presence of their predecessors, so you can make use of them even if you've traded the base abilities away.

Race

Race, while not the end all and be all of optimization, acts as a very relevant factor of the power in a build. In particular, the value sets its baseline at a bit more than a feat, with human, but can easily be worth significantly more. Generally speaking, there are two major varieties of race. First, you have your relatively interchangeable power adding races. These are your humans and your anthropomorphic bat, acting as a serious boon to your druidic efforts, but if you lost the race then you'd have a similar looking build. Second, you have your races that are critical to your specific build, because they essentially act as prerequisites to other aspects of your build. These are your shifters and half-orcs, granting access to substitution levels and prestige classes alike. The latter type of race is certainly more important if you choose to make use of it, but in either case there are strong returns from a race well chosen.

Aasimar, Lesser (PGtF, 191): You get a +2 to wisdom and charisma, daylight as a once/day SLA, resistance 5 to acid, cold, and electricity, and a +2 to spot and listen checks. Lesser aasimar isn't quite on the same level as some other races, like anthropomorphic bat, but it distinguishes itself by being a +wis race with no downsides and a bunch of reasonable upsides. This is a race which doesn't make you into a shriveled weakling whenever you stop being a bear, and you get to improve both your scouting and diplomacy abilities by a decent amount, while also adding to your defenses and picking up a usable spell each day. All in all, lesser aasimar isn't a spectacular race, as it might be on something like a cleric, but it's quite strong and well rounded.

Anthropomorphic Bat (SS, 215): Get +6 wisdom, -4 strength, -2 charisma, 20 foot (average) flight, small size bonuses, and darkvision out to 60 feet. There's no LA or RHD, so the only real downsides are the 5 foot land speed, and the fact that you're an anthropomorphic bat. As a bonus, you become a monstrous humanoid, and thus get access to the Fangshields druid substitution levels, which are rather nifty, and are pretty much always worth taking at least a little if you can. The wisdom bonus you pick up is the highest you can access without LA or RHD, and the other abilities are pretty great as well. This is probably the best druid race, at least in the absence of specific race requirements for a build (like shifter druids), though it's a bit on the cheesy side of things.

Axani, Lesser (Dragon Magazine #297, 97): You get a +2 to wisdom and intelligence, calm emotions as a once/day SLA, resistance 5 to cold and sonic, and a +2 to diplomacy and spot. This race is rather similar to lesser aasimar, in that it has a bonus to wisdom, a second ability score bonus, and then reasonable upside from there. However, axani is generally advantaged. Where the aasimar has a +2 to charisma, the axani has one to intelligence, the usually better stat, along with a bonus to diplomacy, actually granting an advantage over the aasimar in social situations. Where the aasimar has daylight, a rather marginal and uninteresting spell, the axani has calm emotions, a spell that, while lower in level, has the advantages of being off list and providing relatively unique utility. The only real downsides from there are the loss of one energy resistance, along with that +2 to listen, but really, most of the differences here pale in comparison to that intelligence bump. Like the lesser aasimar before it, the lesser axani is a reasonable and well rounded race with no serious downsides, except the axani is marginally better.

Buoman (PIH, 8): You get +2 wisdom and -2 charisma, along with low-light vision and a +2 bonus on listen and perform (sing) checks. Also, you lose the ability to speak, which necessitates the use of silent spell or nonverbal spell (PIH, 40) to use magic. To make a long story short, there are better ways to get a bonus to wisdom. Yes, you can technically use dragonborn to remove the vow against speech "ability", but it's a bit on the cheesy side, and you're still better off running anthropomorphic

bat or lesser aasimar. There's nothing on offer here that's particularly better than what you can obtain elsewhere, and there's a ton on offer elsewhere that isn't here.

Changeling (ECS, 12): While the changeling's ability to disguise itself as any race and its slew of minor bonuses are pretty good, the real draw here is the feat racial emulation (RoE, 110). What this feat does is it enables you to make use a lot of the druid's fancy substitution levels simultaneously. The basic setup here is picking up the first and fourth shifter druid substitution levels (RoE, 126), getting a lot of fancy summoning stuff from the former and some minor bonuses from the latter, and then getting the 6th level half-orc substitution level (RoD, 129), getting augment summoning for nearly free, and for good measure taking the 13th level halfling substitution level (RotW, 157), losing the thousand faces ability that was made useless by the changeling's disguise self for the stealth providing camouflage. This setup also provides access to race specific prestige classes like seeker of the misty isle (CD, 61) and moonspeaker (RoE, 143), which are maintained after swapping to another race because of the way prestige classes work, and you incidentally get race specific spells like commune with earth (RoF, 189). Unfortunately, the need for racial emulation means that changelings start out down a feat, and the relatively poor racial traits mean you're down about another, so you need to be getting some serious value to make this worth it, and you're cutting it close even if you are. The overall setup gets close, so changeling is right on the edge of viability, and the specific gains here mean that they work best on a build with heavy summoning focus.

Goliath (RoS, 56): The goliath is an LA+1 race which features only +2 constitution and powerful build as relevant racial traits. The only things that cause the goliath to warrant consideration are goliath druid substitution levels, and the stonespeaker guardian prestige class. Unfortunately for the goliath, neither of these options is very good, or even parity maintaining, and that's before considering LA. The substitution levels at least provide some interesting abilities, even if they are a net-negative, and if you're building an earth themed druid, using these tools is a valid way to go about it. Ultimately though, from an optimization perspective, goliath is really bad. Powerful build is quite a good thing to have, as it stacks with

wild shape, but the abilities being offered here don't even necessarily compare favorably to LA+0 druid races.

Halfling, Ghostwise (FRCS, 17): You are as the standard halfling, except in exchange for the +1 to saves, you get telepathy out to 20 feet. The utility being offered here is rather obvious, as this telepathy can circumvent the wild shape communication problem with ease. Whether this ability is worth losing the feat from strongheart halfling is questionable, as items like a pearl of speech can provide a cheaper solution, but having the communication as a fundamental aspect of your race, rather than as some item that's dependent on outside forces for its existence, is a rather appealing prospect.

Halfling, Strongheart (FRCS, 18): You are a halfling, except you lose the bonus to saves, and you gain a bonus feat. For obvious reasons of featy goodness, this is a good thing. Still, after you have wild shape, many of the advantages of being a strongheart halfling disappear for the most part. You don't particularly care about gaining two dexterity or losing two strength, and size bonuses are obviously meaningless by that point. However, halflings get a lot of random minor bonuses, and if those are worth more to you than a skill point per level, this is a decent choice over human. Strongheart halfling is also a good choice if you care about your non-wild shaped form, either because you're starting at a low level, or because you plan to trade it away for something. In that case, the benefits from being small, and the stat changes, are generally nice. You also need to be a halfling to get the substitution levels, so that's worth consideration. They're not very good, so it's not worth much consideration, but they're there.

Half-Orc, Desert: Half-orcs are bad, but their substitution levels are quite good, so the race is worth some consideration. In any case, if you're choosing half-orc, desert is the best option. You get +2 con and -2 int, which moves points from your tertiary stat to your secondary one, so it's a net positive. You also gain heat endurance, which can be a bit useful sometimes, low-light vision, which is quite mediocre, and run as a bonus feat, which might actually be worse. These things

range from bad to mediocre, but the substitution levels push half-orc from bad to somewhat optimal. If you want those levels, desert half-orc is your best option, and if you don't, you're looking at the wrong race.

Human: You gain a bonus feat as well as an extra skill point each level plus three more points at first. Human is basically the baseline race that all other racial options need to be judged against, because a bonus feat is going to be quite useful on just about any build in existence. You're a bit restricted in the feats you can pick, as wild shape form adding feats, rasemi elemental summoning, and a few other options of note don't come online until later, but you're almost always going to have some way to spend a feat that really boosts the power level of a build. The extra skill point less important by a fair margin, but is still universally useful, as the druid skill list is broad enough to accommodate extra points even at a high intelligence modifier. Other more specialized racial options will often make a superior choice to human, depending on your build, but human is always a good race.

Human, Silverbrow (DrM, 6): You lose the bonus skill points of a normal human, and gain the dragonblood subtype, a feather fall a day plus once/5 HD, a +2 racial bonus on disguise checks, and disguise as a class skill. The benefits here compared to normal human are pretty marginal, but then again, the downsides are pretty marginal as well. The biggest difference here is probably dragonblood, as it enables some minor upsides on the primal line of spells, and potentially grants access to other build elements, but the disguise ability is reasonable if you plan to make real use of it. Feather fall tends to be a bit of a do nothing, especially multiple times a day, but it's a good thing to have when you need it. All in all, silverbrow human just about breaks even with normal human, with the choice depending a lot on how much use you plan to get out of the subtype.

Ice Para-Genasi, Lesser (Dragon Magazine #297, 64): You get ability score adjustments of +4 Con, +2 Wis, -2 Dex, and -2 Cha, a +1 racial bonus to saves against cold effects which grows by +1 for every five levels you have, and chill metal once/day. The big selling point here is very much the ability score

adjustments. +2 to your primary stat is in itself sufficient to merit consideration, and with a big +4 to your secondary stat, combined with rather irrelevant penalties, you're looking at a really solid race, especially when you consider the fact that everything else is pure upside.

Illumian (RoD, 51): The illuminian is a race whose utility is defined near entirely by an ability called power sigils. Basically, you pick a pair of these sigils, one at first level and one at second, which provide some pretty weak bonuses, and the specific pair you pick grants an extra ability that tends to be significantly more powerful. Three of these are of particular interest to a druid, and I'll go into detail about these below, but first it's worth noting the less critical abilities. The most important such ability is probably speak language added to your skill list. Which is nice, but should give an indication of the scale of ability we're talking about here. The next ability is immunity to any spell with glyph, rune, sigil, or symbol in its name if its caster level is less than or equal to your level, but a -4 on saves against those spells if its caster level is greater than yours. This is obviously a bit of a mixed bag, and a mixed bag that isn't too broadly applicable at that. Of note here though is that one of the more popular such spells, explosive runes, doesn't even offer a save if you're too close to the effect, so the ability offers a bit of extra upside in that case. Finally, you get a +2 against spells with the shadow descriptor, a group that notably includes the shadow evocation and conjuration lines. It's also worth note that you have little glowy symbols around your head where turning them off turns off your main ability, so that's a hit to stealth sometimes. And you also say a bunch of gibberish when you die, for whatever that's worth. Anyway, onto the main ability, illuminian words.

Aeshkrau: You can use your strength score instead of your wisdom score to determine bonus spells. Also, you get a +2 to strength and strength skill based checks, and a +2 to caster level for spells and SLA's up to a maximum of your character level (+1 at level one, and you have to choose between them at that level, though strength is obviously a bit better). So, this ability is pretty ridiculous. You still need to boost wisdom, for both save DCs and to cast your spells at all, but the most important part, how many spells you get, is based entirely on strength, and wild shape can boost your strength a whole

hell of a lot.

Even just in core, even just with bears, you can be running stuff like a polar bear at 8th for 27 strength, or dire bear at 12th for 31. Out of core you get even more bears, like dire polar bear at 18th for 39 strength. Bears are pretty strong, turns out. Even without strength boosters that's a ridiculous number of bonus spells, more than you're typically going to acquire otherwise. Like, combine 18 starting wisdom with a +6 from anthropomorphic bat, a +5 from level up, and +5 from tomes and you're still only at 34. And while it's still obviously worth investing in wisdom this way, you don't necessarily have to put as much effort into it.

That said, this ability is pretty weird, both in terms of underlying functioning and in terms of its value proposition. For the former, it's rather unclear what happens if and when you stop being a bear. The rules do not really clarify how or if you lose bonus spells when you lose the underlying stat. If you don't lose the spells, as seems vaguely supported by the operation of some other abilities, effects, and flavor chunks, then this is a lot stronger. It means you can get the benefit of extra spells without being tied down to burly combat forms. If you do lose the spells, which, as above, seems like a somewhat less accurate reading though definitely not one that really goes against RAW, then the operation depends somewhat on how you lose the spells. If you can assign spells to bonus slots, and those are what is lost when you lose stats, then you can use those slots for buffs and stuff before swapping. If you always lose actual spells unless you have nothing to lose then, well, you could cast everything of the spell level but you're probably stuck in bear form all day if you want the benefit, and I doubt it's worth it.

All that said, assuming everything works as well as is possible, how good is this? One important factor here is that it's very level dependent. The polar bear comes online at level eight, and the spell gain isn't exactly world rendering. Anthro bat just straight up matches that modifier, for example, and without having to jump through hoops. Dire bear at 12 is a marginally better

proposition, and the late game options are actively great, but that's a lot of levels of no benefit, a solid pile of levels with reasonable benefits, and then an absolute ton of bonus spells when you have 18th level wild shape. Which, wild shape level boosters help with this, but it's still a pretty high level maneuver.

So, that's the big problem with the ability, that you really have to be starting at higher level to make it worth it. But there're other problems too. You have to give up a wild shape use a day, for one thing, which isn't nothing. You'll usually have lower wisdom, both because you're not picking a +wis race and because you're likely spending your cash on +strength items. You don't get much in the way of other abilities or stat boosts either. And, of course, the whole thing is real cheesy and maybe doesn't even work, and that's never a good thing.

Still, if you are starting at a somewhat later level, this is quite strong. I've been primarily comparing to something like anthro bat, but, y'know, that race is incredible. This is less good, but it's still good, and if you have access to the highest strength forms then the bonus spells are beyond compare.

Naenhoon: Twice a day, you can use metamagic for free, no impact on spell level or casting time, by using as many turn/rebuke undeads as the metamagic costs. Also, you get a +2 to constitution, intelligence, and wisdom checks and skill checks (+1 at level one, and you have to pick between constitution and int/wis at that level). So, this is basically divine metamagic, except you can only use it twice a day. As with divine metamagic, you probably want to be using this with persistent spell. Also as with divine metamagic, this maneuver isn't that great on druids. You need to pick up a form of turning somehow, the feat cost is high, and druid spells aren't as amenable to persist as cleric spells are. Also, you could just take divine metamagic instead of this and do it better. Human is right there offering a bonus feat so it's not like this costs less. This isn't a great choice.

Uurkrau: This is like aeshkrau except, instead of getting bonus spells based on strength (and attendant tiny bonuses), you get them based on dexterity. The big downside of this ability is that dexterity never exactly hits the heights of ridiculousness that strength does. About the highest score I've seen is legendary eagle with 30 dexterity, though the fact that it's accessible at 12th means you're doing pretty well at that specific level. It's not like high dexterity forms are completely absent otherwise. They're just generally not so high that you compare especially favorably to standard wisdom boosting.

This ability does feature one big advantage though. Specifically, legendary eagle is a pretty good form. Not incredible or anything, and the average flight speed is kinda annoying, but it's alright. You could just be a legendary eagle all the time if you wanted, and you'd skip out on some of the problems and cheese. Also, if you do swap forms, then a dexterity boosting item is typically going to be better than a strength boosting one. You can even do this hybrid style, using legendary eagle for the spells, using the duration for standard eagle value, and then swapping later, thus keeping your wild shape use. All in all though, this just isn't the value proposition that aeshkrau is. It's pretty good, at least if you're mid-level, but you're not getting the spell piles that make it all worth it.

Jermlaine (MM II, 131, [3.5 update PDF](#)): Become a tiny fey with +6 wisdom and dexterity, -8 strength, -6 charisma, and -2 constitution and intelligence. You also have a 40 foot speed. The wisdom bonus is, as always, incredibly powerful. However, sacrificing a chunk of your charisma, as well as a bit of constitution and intelligence, is problematic. Those stats range from incredibly important to nice to have on a druid's list. Meanwhile the strength penalty is close to meaningless by the levels where you have wild shape, but pretty annoying before that, and the dexterity bonus is really nice before you have wild shape, but close to meaningless afterwards. I'd call it a wash, but at that kind of strength penalty, you're looking at issues with carrying capacity, which is annoying. Being a fey gets you access to fangshields druid substitution levels which are nice to have (See the ACF section for details). All in all, this is a solid race, but I'd put it significantly less powerful than

the anthropomorphic bat, which this is in direct competition with in every sense.

Kobold: While the base stats of this race are abominable, kobold has the sole distinction of granting access to the feat dragonwrought (RotD, 100), which changes your type to dragon. This is a thing that offers two separate varieties of cheese. First, it stops you from taking penalties for advanced age, which means that you can go venerable for a free +3 to wisdom, as well as intelligence and charisma. For reference, that leaves you with an overall stat adjustment of -4 str, +2 dex, -2 con, +3 int, +3 wis, +3 cha. Second, it grants potential access to epic feats without being epic (Draconomicon, 66).

While these things look excellent from the outside, what you're ultimately doing is apply a massive amount of cheese for something generally significantly worse than a dragonborn anthropomorphic bat. Said race has a superior statistical makeup, along with just about all of the extra benefits that dragonwrought provides, and it does all of that without spending a feat, and while granting simultaneous access to fangshields druid substitution levels. Epic feats, meanwhile, are usually out of reach based on prerequisites, and the few remaining cases require a pretty high level and aren't a significant improvement over stuff like greenbound summoning or aberration wild shape. Still, if you're going this route, feats of interest include improved elemental wild shape, which grants access to the whole elemental type with Ex and Su abilities included, and gargantuan wild shape, which has pretty limited returns within a standard HD range, but which might have some utility when combined with form adding (cause gargantuan animals are kinda boring). The venerable dragonwrought kobold isn't a bad racial choice by any means, offering a pile of reasonable and interesting benefits, but it's also not the best racial choice, with the feat stuff only really coming online at high level, and it costs you a lot of getting cheese past the DM points to make use of it.

Shifter (RoE, 25): See shifter section for details.

Tortle (DrM #315, 72): You get ability score adjustments of +2 con, +2 wis, -2 dex and -2 cha. Moreover, you get endurance as a bonus feat, a +3 natural armor

bonus, a +8 to swim checks, and you have a 20 ft. land speed with a 10 foot swim speed. With a bonus to your primary and secondary stat alike, and a penalty to only a distant tertiary stat, this weird turtle race is well situated for druidry. The rest is pretty irrelevant, especially once you get wild shape, though endurance sticks around and has to have some sort of utility in some context. This is a good race with few downsides, one of the better +2 wisdom options out there. Also, the name is amazing.

Templates

Templates are akin to races in their nature. You want good ability score adjustments, abilities that synergize with your druidic nature, and zero LA or RHD. Templates, however, tend to be of lower impact as a result of the fact that they apply their abilities on top of the race you were already getting. Still, a template occasionally slips through the cracks that acts as a direct upgrade to your capabilities (though occasionally, as in the case of dragonborn, only as applies to certain races), and those make excellent additions to any druid. Moreover, there are a couple of templates that manage to be worth some advancement, or that are at least not pure downside, if only barely and occasionally so.

Arctic (Dragon Magazine #306, 61): You modify your ability scores by +2 constitution and -2 charisma, gain a +1 racial bonus to saving throws against cold effects and a -1 against fire, get a +2 on survival checks, and can use ray of frost as an SLA once/day. However, the base race needs to be from the PHB. This template pushes points from a sometimes tertiary stat to your always amazing secondary stat, and then everything else is just additional marginal upside from there. Arctic is just a universally amazing template for druids as a result, with the only real downside being that it restricts you to a few racial options.

Dragonborn (RotD, 8): Dragonborn is a nifty template that removes the majority of the base race's traits, and adds in a whole host of new ones. In particular, ability score modifiers, size, movement modes, and languages of the base race stay the same, and every other racial trait is eliminated. In return, dragonborn gives you +2 constitution, -2 dexterity, the dragonblood subtype, a +2 dodge bonus to AC against dragons, immunity to frightful presence, and either a breath weapon, a variety of vision modes, or some limited flight capabilities.

This pile of stuff is obviously of some benefit, particularly the constitution bonus, so it all comes down to what you'd be losing off the base race. In general, if the major racial traits of a given race are things that you'd be losing, like on a human or

strongheart halfling, this template should be avoided. However, if you're pretty much just getting stuff that you'll get to bring with you, like with an anthropomorphic bat, or a jermlaine, this is an obvious thing to add onto your character. Additionally, there are some races, like the buoman, who have detrimental traits that you'd lose through dragonborn, and in those cases you're possibly taking the race because dragonborn exists. As a final addendum, the dragonblood subtype has some marginal benefits that pop up from time to time. For example, all four spells in the Primal X line become a bit more powerful with the subtype. This generally isn't a reason to become a dragonborn, but it's something to look out for once you get there.

As for the three possible abilities: wings, heart, and mind, they're all decently powerful. On most classes, wings are the most powerful by a fair margin, but they're rather redundant given the druid's propensity for using wild shape to fly around all the time, and they won't allow a non-winged form to fly, because you lose your movement modes in a wild shape. Heart, the breath weapon ability, likely would be the best choice, due to its capacity for turning the copious amounts of time a druid can produce into damage. However, you can't use this ability in a wild shape, and you can generally expect to be in wild shape all the time, so heart is usually going to be useless. Thus, as it is the only ability that works while wild shaped, mind is likely the best option out of the three. The vision modes are rather weak, and often redundant with a druid's natural abilities, though blindsense out to 30 feet at 15 HD is decently powerful. However, the other abilities are a bit better on a druid. You gain immunity to paralysis and magical sleep effects, which are relatively rare as conditions go, but they're strong if they happen. You also get a +2 on listen, search, and spot checks, which is pretty good on a druid who's focusing on listen and spot. Druids make reasonably effective scouts, and mind provides a good compliment to that facet of their power. Ultimately, the order in which I'd choose these abilities goes mind, heart, and wings, because that order reflects the degree to which these abilities have synergy with natural druid powers.

Necropolitan (LM, 114): The necropolitan's greatest, and often only, upside is that it makes you an undead. This means immunities, and it means a whole hell of

a lot of them, to some of the most powerful conditions in the entire game. In particular, it grants immunity to mind-affecting, poison, sleep effects, paralysis, stunning, disease, death effects, critical hits, nonlethal damage, ability drain, energy drain, physical ability damage, fatigue, exhaustion, and anything with a fortitude save that isn't harmless or able to hit objects. You also get to turn your HD into d12's, though this isn't always strict upside, as you also lose your constitution score, and its boost to HP. That means an even more focused ability score assignment, but if you would have had a 16 or higher, you're losing HP. Notably, faerie mysteries initiate (Dragon Magazine #319, 58) allows you to use intelligence for HP, granting a potentially even higher HP, but you are spending a feat and altering your stat allocation for the privilege.

However, these massive advantages do come with costs. The first and biggest is that the ritual needed to turn you necropolitan costs a level and 1,000 XP. Unlike standard LA, this disadvantage does go away eventually, but taking a big bite out of your druid abilities, even temporarily, is a problematic thing. That they return does make the necropolitan template usable where a similar LA having template wouldn't be, however. The second disadvantage is akin to the big advantage of this template, that you become an undead. This means that, in addition to the loss of constitution, you also take damage from cure spells, and while you do gain life from inflicts, you don't have those on your list. It's an issue that especially eats into the utility of unicorn summoning, though you can always use it to heal others, as well as the spell heal, which is still useful for that same reason. Moreover, going undead means gaining vulnerability to undead targeting effects, like turn undead and command undead. Fortunately, necropolitans do get a +2 against control undead and turn undead, but that only goes so far. Finally, this type means that raise dead effects won't work, while reincarnation will work but will strip you of your advantages. So, as always, it is preferable not to die. In any case, this is a great defensive template, providing a ridiculously broad smattering of immunities, but the costs are definitely present, and make the question of its use something of a tossup.

Saint (BoED, 184): See exalted druids for details.

Unseelie Fey (Dragon Compendium, 222): This +0 template forces the base creature to be evil, applies +2 dexterity and charisma, -2 strength and constitution, wings that grant flight with average maneuverability at twice your normal speed, dr/cold iron that scales based on HD, a +4 on intimidate checks, a low grade iron vulnerability, and your type changes to fey. On top of that, you gain one of four seasonally based powers. These are vernal touch, an at will touch that removes dazed, nauseated, fatigued, and exhausted from a living creature or turns an undead one, summer caress, an always on magic circle effect that works against creatures that aren't animals, fey, or magical beasts, autumn harvest, a touch range targeted dispel that works 1+cha mod times a day, or winter chill, an aura out to five feet which applies a penalty to the saving throws of living non-fey equal to your cha mod. Finally, you gain low-light vision, with a lower chance of normal vision, darkvision out to 60 ft., sightless tremorsense out to 30 ft., or sightless blindsight out to 30 ft.

So, long story short, a lot of stuff happens. As major upside, you gain a strong flight ability, at least in your base form, and summer caress makes for a very strong ability, if you get/choose that one (the selection mechanic on that particular facet is a bit ambiguous). Vernal touch is also rather decent, as those status conditions can be devastating, but the other two are rather underwhelming, because while winter chill is potentially quite potent, it requires you to raise what is at best a tertiary stat, and get within very close range of enemies. As major downside, you face a -2 to constitution, your secondary stat, without a compensating wisdom gain, and perhaps even more damning, you are forced to go evil. This is possibly troubling from a roleplaying perspective, but the real thing of note for this handbook is how it hits you in terms of optimization, and what it does is limit your spell selection away from both good and sanctified spells, and blocks access to a few worthwhile feats. Additionally, if you end up hitting the 10% chance of no normal vision, that also constitutes a major downside, as the vision modes you get in return are easier to replace than what you lose.

All in all, while there are good things on offer here, the druid's relative lack of interest in flight combined with native ability to match many of the things granted

makes those good things a bit less good than they would normally be. This template is very much worth it if you get summer caress (or maybe vernal touch) along with a vision mode of at least normal, and if you're planning to go evil anyway. If any of those things isn't true, then the benefits on offer likely do not outweigh the cost, at least after wild shape becomes a thing.

Skills

Skills are perhaps the lowest order of character build optimization/customization, yet they can still play a critical role in any given build. This is true for a few reasons. First, there are some skills that directly interact with class features, either by being the direct basis for their workings, or by simply improving on what already exists. An example of this is knowledge (nature), which provides animal and plant identification, granting familiarity for wild shape purposes. Second, there are skills that provide unique capabilities that don't directly interact with class features, expanding your power or utility in other ways. An example of this is diplomacy, which allows a druid access to the role of face. Third, there are skills which provide synergy bonuses to skills of the other two categories after you provide five ranks, increasing your capabilities in those areas. An example of this is survival, which applies its bonus to the aforementioned knowledge (nature). In all of these cases, you're gaining major advantages from proper skill selection, and it is critical to focus on these purposes, and how you're prioritizing them, as you choose the skills you want.

Base Class

Concentration: This is one of the most important skills you have access to. It makes you better at casting spells, and casting spells is the single most powerful things you do. Concentration is even more important for druids than it is for other full casters. Because of wild shape, you're occasionally going to want to stand five feet from your enemies and cast a spell, and you're going to want to cast it defensively. Because of summoning, your opponents are going to often have the opportunity to interrupt your spell, because of the one round casting time. Max this one out, and maybe even pick up an item for it if you have the time and inclination.

Craft: This skill just doesn't do much of anything. Alchemical items are decent and varied, so picking that one up could be justifiable, but this just doesn't seem worth it. A druid has too many good skills to be wasting his time on craft.

Diplomacy: This skill is universally fantastic, and druids are rather good at using it. Between their SAD nature, and their wild empathy, a druid can easily slot himself into the role of party face. A druid certainly doesn't make the best diplomacy focused character, due to charisma being a tertiary stat at best, and the difficulty in accessing synergy skills, but they're not the worst at it either. This is strongly worth consideration, and is the major factor that would cause you to push charisma over intelligence.

Handle Animal: Handle animal is a very complicated and involved skill with a pile of applications. I could never go into nearly as much detail as the [handle animal guide](#), so just head thereabouts. For you in particular, it's a skill that lets you teach your animal companion non-bonus tricks, and gives you the ability to have it use those tricks on a consistent basis. It's a rather useful skill for that reason alone. Generally, the goal is to have enough handle animal that you're able to consistently get your animal companion to do its tricks. As a druid, that takes a DC 10 roll, and you have a +4 to that roll, and a minimum roll of 1. Thus, in the absence of a charisma modifier, the number of skill points you should try to hit is 5. Conveniently, this is also the amount of points necessary to get a +2 synergy bonus on wild empathy and ride checks. Of course, if you want to use handle animal outside of these purposes, you're going to want a greater investment, but 5 is a good base number for a druid.

Heal: Heal isn't worth it. If you really want to stabilize an ally, prepare a few instances of cure minor wounds. You may have to sacrifice some uses of detect magic and create water, but it's a small price to pay for the fate of your skill points. The only real utility is running the spell healing lorecall, but that spell isn't really good enough to be worth the investment.

Knowledge (nature): Generally, knowledge nature is used as the mechanism to determine a druid's familiarity with animals for the purposes of wild shape. Thus, the versatility of one of your most powerful abilities is dependent on you maxing this stat out. It's also a monster identification knowledge, which are generally the

most important ones you can get. You can get a really high score in this, due to nature sense, intelligence being the best tertiary stat, and the fact that you have survival on your list. Use this to your advantage, and push knowledge (nature) as high as it can go.

Listen/Spot: These skills allow you to hear or see things around you, and are opposed by move silently and hide, respectively. They're listed together here, because you're generally going to be taking them together, and they have similar levels of usefulness. Scouting fits pretty well on a druid for a few reasons. First, druids pump wisdom as high as it goes, so you're going to see a big bonus to these skills incidentally. Second, wild shape grants access to some inconspicuous forms, particularly those of the aerial variety, and that grants a solid edge in this department. Third, druids have access to several alternate vision modes, ranging all the way from low-light vision, to scent, to blindsight, and to get full benefit of those vision modes, you're going to want a way to bypass mundane hiding ability. Fourth, druids have several spells, like primal senses, and wild instincts, that boost these skills, and that can further increase the edge that druids have. Druids are one of the best classes in the game when it comes to scouting around to find hiding enemies, so if that's a role you want to fill, these skills are highly worthwhile.

Profession: Like craft, profession just doesn't do anything for you. Making tiny amounts of money in large amounts of time is beneath you.

Ride: If you want to do the thing where you ride around on your animal companion, you should obviously max out ranks in ride. It's not a path that I would advise taking, but it's available to you if you want it.

Spellcraft: This is the skill that tells you what your most powerful enemies are doing. If spellcraft isn't helping you against an enemy, that enemy probably wasn't that threatening in the first place. Max this out if possible.

Survival: Survival has a couple of niche uses, but it's not a must by any means. Most of the abilities work the same on druids as they do on everyone else, but

weather prediction can be a surprisingly useful tool in your arsenal. Many druid spells have the scale of their effects dependent on the weather, so knowing the weather in advance can inform your spell selection to some extent. It's also definitely worth picking up five ranks for the synergy bonus to knowledge (nature).

Swim: Swim does exactly what it says on the tin, which is help you swim. Even if you really want swimming ability, you shouldn't pick this skill up, because druids have ridiculous native access to swimming ability. Aquatic wild shape forms are an obvious solution to swimming based problems, and don't underestimate the swimming aspect of heart of water.

Granted Outside of Class

While most skills find their way on your list naturally, some you need to put work into getting. In particular, you may wind up with a substitution level or feat that expands your list in some fashion, though in the case of substitution levels, the increase is strictly temporary. As a general rule, you shouldn't really spend that much in the way of resources to gain a skill. The druid list is quite expansive, and can easily accommodate all but the most unnaturally large quantity of skill points without feeling significant strain. At the same time though, options exist that add skills at low cost, or even incidentally, and in those cases it's a thing you should be happy to have if you choose to make use of it. Below is a list of these halfway off-list skills, rated as though they were normal skills, because often the decision to use or not use the added skill is harder than the decision of whether to gain it in the first place.

Balance (shifter substitution levels): If you can, pick up five ranks in this so that you aren't considered flat-footed while balancing. You don't want to be caught off guard by a jerk with marbles. Still, this is less important for a druid than for most classes, because druids can access flight trivially, and flight obsoletes balance.

Climb (halfling, shifter substitution levels, or warden initiate): Druids have no shortage of mobility options, and this one doesn't measure up. You can even get

an actual climb speed through wild shape if flight isn't cutting it for some ridiculous reason.

Hide/Move Silently (halfling substitution levels or nightbringer initiate):

Hide and move silently are pretty solid, particularly if you can see yourself going on frequent stealth missions. Hide is particularly useful on a druid, as you can modify your size to apply extra modifiers, though that may just make move silently even more important, as you need to compensate in that area. Realistically, the stealth path isn't an ideal one for a druid, but if your party is really in need of some way to pull this off, these skills might make for a good plan. You may be better off just summoning something suited for stealth, however.

Intimidation (half-orc substitution levels): This is a pretty good skill, and you might as well pick it up if you have access to it, and you're doing the diplomacy/party face thing. Druids have no real mechanism to make a whole shtick out of intimidation, but it's still a good skill if you want it.**Jump (halfling substitution levels):** This skill helps you jump. It's exactly as useful as it sounds. Avoid the mighty allure of jumping, and just become a bat like any normal druid.**Knowledge (arcana) (sidhe scholar):** This is the identification skill for dragons, so if it's ruled that you aren't naturally given access to dragon forms by way of dragon wild shape, then this is an important skill to have for the purposes of that feat. It also gets you construct and magical beast identification which grants it broader knowledge-style utility, as does its more standard knowledgey uses. Can't ever go too far off course knowing stuff about wizards and such.**Knowledge (religion) (various prestige classes, including holt warden):**

Knowledge (religion) serves a dual purpose. Primarily, it acts as a way to gain access to classes that require ranks as a prerequisite, because those classes can be quite good. If you're in that rhetorical boat of class desire though, the case should be pretty clear cut. Secondarily, the skill also obviously acts as your ordinary

everyday skill, and in that role, it is also useful. Religion is one of the better knowledges out there, as it picks up the rather broad undead type, and accessing it is nifty.

Knowledge (the planes) (planar substitution levels and gatekeeper initiate):

This is a monster identification stat, so you can't go too off course picking up some points in it if you have access. This is especially true if you get this skill through gatekeeper initiate, as that feat causes it to apply for knowledge (dungeoneering) for identifying aberrations and their abilities. If you're going planar shepherd you're going to need at least 4 ranks for prerequisite purposes.

Sense Motive (skilled city-dweller): You need to lose survival to pick this up, which can occasionally be worth investment, but what you get in return is an important skill for any party face. Countering bluff can be an important part of social encounters, and identifying that someone is under a mind-affecting effect is occasionally useful, if too time consuming to typically come up. Perhaps the most useful use, however, is investing five ranks for a +2 to diplomacy, because diplomacy is great. This trade is one you're almost certain to make on a heavily socially oriented build, and an at least reasonable one for a more standard build.

Speak Language (voice of the city): This skill is significantly more important for a druid than it is for most other classes, because commanding summons to do specific things, like casting SLA's, requires some method of communication. Fortunately, the voice of the city ACF (See ACF section for more details) grants speak language as a class skill, which is one of the few ways to get it. It's rather nifty. The relevant languages, and the summonable creatures that speak them, are as follows:

- Aquan: hippocampus, nixie (partial), tojanida, water elemental
- Auran: air elemental, arrowhawk, orglash, storm elemental
- Dwarven: oread
- Ignan: fire elemental, salamanders (partial), Thoqqua (presumably)
- Sylvan: grig (partial), nixie (partial), satyr (partial), oread
- Terran: earth elemental, thomil, oread

Tumble (skilled city-dweller): Picking this up requires ditching ride, but that's a low cost for anything. What you get in return is a solid combat skill whose most interesting use is easily moving at half speed without provoking attacks. You also get to take marginally less damage from falling, and pass through squares with enemies in them later on, but that's largely secondary. If you expect to be running around the battlefield and hitting folk, then this is a pretty good skill, though it's not all that worthwhile if you intend to focus more on casting.

Cross Class

Autohypnosis: Autohypnosis operates a lot like a rather powerful skill trick on a druid. You invest a single rank, which costs two skill points, and between your wisdom modifier and the +2 synergy bonus from concentration, you suddenly have a score that bottoms out somewhere around +7 and that can go a lot higher with the standard array of wisdom boosters. The greatest benefit to this is that you can memorize a page of text with a DC 15 check, which will work every time if you take ten, but it also adds on a pile of minor resistances. These include free additional rolls to resist the slowing effect of caltrops, and to turn off fear effects in the turn after they hit you, a replacement roll for stabilization checks that will basically always be better than what you get normally, the ability to do stuff at zero life without taking damage, and you can substitute autohypnosis for the relevant save against the secondary effects of poison. It's a wide smattering of effects that, while small, add up to something greater than what you'd typically get for two skill points.

Use Magic Device: Use magic device is a skill that is worse for druids than it is for just about anyone else. Druids have their own casting, after all, and it's damn good casting at that, it's clearly not a class skill, and charisma is a tertiary stat at best. However, use magic device is so good that it may sometimes be worth taking despite that. This is a skill that lets you pull magic off of other lists, albeit low level magic, and that in and of itself is a ridiculously powerful thing. This is a skill that takes some investment though, and a pretty good amount of it, so you have to be

willing to eat away at your other skill powers just to be in the running.

Skill Tricks

Skill tricks are abilities similar to weakened feats in nature, that can be purchased for two skill points. Generally speaking, they can only be used once an encounter. Also generally speaking, they make for a pretty solid way to spend skill points. Skill points are a valuable thing, granted, but they tend to be a bit limited in scope, and you're usually going to have a lot of them to work with. You should typically try to keep your major class feature skills maxed before picking one of these up, but if you can divert a few points from diplomacy to get swift concentration, that might be a thing worth doing. Better yet, you can maintain one miscellaneous skill point each level to spend on stuff like speak language or skill tricks so you don't just have one skill behind the max (this plan requires that you skip maxing out a skill for a level to get the two points, but you can catch back up afterwards). All in all, these things tend to really increase your capabilities in interesting ways, though the druid-pertinent list is rather short.

Clarity of Vision (CS, 85): You gain the ability to make a DC 20 spot check as a swift action to pinpoint the location of invisible creatures within 30 feet. While druids certainly aren't lacking in effective vision modes, it can be tricky to have them up constantly, as they're often rooted to particular wild shape forms. A backup way to deal with invisibility, particularly one that doesn't eat into actions, is a nice thing to have. It also helps that clarity of vision pinpoints locations, while some common druid vision modes, like blindsense, do not do that. Clarity of vision is thus a solid skill trick as long as you're investing in scouting anyway.

Collector of Stories (CS, 85): You gain a +5 competence bonus to trained knowledge checks used to identify creatures. While this skill trick might not seem highly useful on a druid, owing to the fact that the class normally only gets knowledge (nature) on its list, the true benefit here is that this bonus applies to the check that presumably determines familiarity, and with it, the ability to wild shape into a given creature. This ability is especially useful if your game requires you to

make checks for feat added forms, like dragons or aberrations, as it grants a reasonable level of success off of a low number of skill ranks.

Listen to This (CS, 87): You gain the ability to repeat anything you hear for an hour with perfect clarity. As skill tricks go, this one is a bit on the marginal side, but there is some definite utility to be gained from the ability to repeat things perfectly. The stated use in the book is giving information to an ally in a language you don't understand which they do, but the broader benefit is in the general field of scouting, made easier along every axis by perfect recall. You're definitely relying on corner cases to make this really good, but those corner cases do exist, and it might be worth having this trick in your back pocket.

Swift Concentration (CS, 90): You gain the ability to maintain concentration on a spell as a swift action. While swift concentration does not allow you to cast a spell while concentrating, freeing up a standard action every so often is a useful thing for other purposes. On a druid especially, who can use those actions to efficiently beat face while still using magic, swift concentration can make for a rather valuable tool. Druids are not exactly lacking in spells with a duration of concentration either, so you will often find a place to make use of this. One of the most interesting uses of swift concentration is that it seems to allow you to concentrate on call lightning as a swift action, thus allowing you to toss two bolts in a turn. For these reasons, swift concentration is definitely worth the points on any build that can afford it, and most builds can.

Sample Build

In this section, I'm going to be laying out a thematically oriented druid build. The goal here isn't just to list all the good stuff a druid can do. That's the purpose of the rest of the handbook. Instead, the aim is more towards building around a cool theme, as well as explaining how to put together all the nitty gritty stuff that goes into druidry. Also, I just happen to love the theming for this particular build, so sharing that is neat stuff.

The Unnatural Druid: The idea behind this particular druid build is to embrace aberrations and undead, two things about as apparently undruidic as exist in the game, as well as any other weird incongruities that can plausibly fit. There are a few major reasons for this. First, lets cover the flavor half of things. This druid sees aberrations and undead as extensions of the natural world, not as opponents of it. They occur in reality, and act in a manner that is at least self-consistent, if not necessarily the same as other creatures. Thus, to deny these creatures naturalness is to deny nature itself, and so this druid attempts to work against that, while also doing normal natural stuff, because why not? It's a pretty cool underlying idea, I think, though in practice various specifics can be altered.

More critical along these flavor lines is the fact that this is doable in the first place. Druids have this stigma associated with them, that they are bound only to this narrow view of nature. Druids love animals, and hate undead. They love plants, and hate aberrations. What is natural is strictly defined by what we in reality would consider natural, and anything else is an anathema. But, from any sort of mechanical perspective, none of that is really true. Druids can do all kindsa stuff that you wouldn't expect, things that you would consider directly opposed to their ethos. This handbook is about being everything, and part of being everything is being some things some would consider antithetical to the class.

The other half, of course, is the mechanics. The most simple factor on the mechanical side is that this build is powerful. Or, more specifically, this build is

powerful in spite of the fact that as many choices as possible are heavily thematically inclined. Picking things for reasons besides power will inevitably lead to a weaker character, but a cool thing about druids is that they can take it. You can go really deep, trading this for that, and choosing weird spells, and you'll still have a strong character. You shouldn't really let fear of weakness keep you away from something cool, but here those fears don't even reflect reality.

A more complex factor, meanwhile, is that this build incorporates a good number of a druid's class features, and in the process essentially requires more than one simple theme. If you really wanted to, you could just build an aberration druid by picking up aberration wild shape and maybe gatekeeper initiate and calling it a day, but then your spell list would go completely unthemed. Casting is a lot of what you are. Making that part of your build neutral good stuff is pretty lame if you're trying to be thematic. Similarly, you could just cast undead type spells, maybe even use a couple of plant forms to make undead, and be done with it, but then your feats and most of your form use would wind up generic. Feats represent most of your long term customization, so that plan wouldn't even leave you with anything that can't be changed within a day. So, multiple themes. Aberration stuff uses the feats, the forms, and even touches on the animal companion a bit, while undead stuff works off of mostly spells with a bit of help from forms. The end result is a druid that uses every part of the animal.

Start-up: For the race, I'm going with the dragonborn anthropomorphic bat. The obvious benefit here is that it's an amazing race. You get the biggest wisdom available that doesn't cost LA or RHD, and you get it at a very low cost. One could even say that you're being paid for that bonus, because you also pick up fangshields druid substitution levels by dint of your non-humanoid nature. The subtler bonus is what would usually be the main downside, in particular that you are an anthropomorphic bat. It's such a weird race, what with it being a giant bat creature that happens to have high wisdom, and that weirdness starts you out on the right foot for what seeks to be a very weird build. And then those aforementioned substitution levels let you give hands to all of your wild shape forms, and that's the most incongruous thing of all, especially combined with the

other kinda-weird fangshields abilities. Notably, should you choose to skip the anthro-bat thing for a more standard humanoid (I like dragonborn desert half-orc), you need to swap the third level feat for aberrant blood.

For stats, I'll assume 25 point buy. This build, like most druids, should emphasize wisdom, then constitution, then intelligence or charisma, so the stat assignments are 18 wis, 14 con, 11 int, 8 cha, 8 str, 8 dex. Of course, the races apply stat adjustments, so the actual resulting stats are 24 wis, 16 con, 11 int, 8 dex, 6 cha, 4 str.

As for skills, you get your choice of four. Knowledge (nature) and concentration are no brainers. Handle animal is pretty useful for the animal companion, and spellcraft is always a good choice for the last one. Alternatively, because mourning mutate can grant a bonus to listen or spot, investing in that same skill might be nice.

Feats: These are the basic customization options for any druid, one of the few things that you're stuck with long term. As such, they represent the thematic core of the build. If your feats aren't aberrationing or undead, then your build isn't either.

First Level: The first feat the druid takes is gatekeeper initiate. While this might seem on the surface like it's opposed to the concept, being all about fighting aberrations, I think it makes sense with the expanded wild shape acting as a sort of extension of your aberration study. Or learning from the gatekeepers could come from your already present desire to learn aberration stuff. Either way. Also, the abilities themselves fit in really well. The addition of knowledge (the planes) to your list combined with the ability to substitute that in for knowledge (dungeoneering) for aberration purposes makes turning into obscure aberrations much more logical. Also, the spells themselves have cool aberration theming. Granted, again, anti-aberration theming, but you take it where you can get it. One important additional note is that this is eschewing the best first option feat, greenbound summoning, partially because it's not on theme at all. Worry not though, for the lack of crazy wall

of thorns action here will be made up for by a different sort of crazy action later.

Third Level: This level the druid takes is mourning mutate (Dragon Magazine #359, 109), the non-humanoid version of aberrant blood, picking either warped ears or warped eyes. Obviously, we aren't here for the direct abilities of the feat, and we're instead setting up for aberration wild shape later on, which is the core of all aberration themed druidry. This feat is necessarily going to pop up at either first or third, and because the first level feat has any sort of real impact, this is the proper ordering.

Sixth Level: As always, natural spell goes here. The feat could arguably be swapped with aberration wild shape, because the occasional aberration has hand-like appendages and the ability to talk, and also because wild shape hands lets you get hands where you wouldn't otherwise have it, but I like to have access to the full scope of wild shape, and this is how you get it. This is especially true since you'd have to find a separate workaround for material components anyway, meaning that you're not really saving a feat in skipping this. So, natural spell goes here, and it's great because it's always great.

Ninth Level: Here stands the cornerstone of this build: aberration wild shape. There's not too much to say here that I haven't already said. It's an amazing feat, one of the best that druids get access to (and that's saying a lot), and it's the reason this sort of build can really exist in the first place. For more information on how to use this feat, check out the whole section of this handbook about aberration wild shape, and I also have some thematically inclined stuff hanging around at the bottom of this handbook.

Twelfth Level: This is, in a sense, the payoff for not taking greenbound earlier, rashmi elemental summoning. It's not exactly a hyper-thematic feat, but it has this whole lifeless and cold vibe that makes some sense. And you really want a summoning feat, so this is making the best of that alright situation. After all, it's not like being a cool aberration is going to make

summoning any less useful, at least where those forms tend caster inclined.

Fifteenth Level: Thematic and build critical feats are starting to run out by this point, so now we're just on the more standard good stuff. With that in mind, this level the druid picks up craft contingent spell. Aberration wild shape has a strong tendency towards making you nigh unkillable, whether you're shrugging off tons of magic as a will-o'-wisp or attacking through the ethereal plane as a dharculus. What better thing, given that, than a feat that can grant you protection from those few things that can breach those crazy defenses?

Eighteenth Level: At this point, it honestly, truly doesn't matter what feat you pick up. Shapechange is online, and with it access to ultimate feat transcending power. Invisible spell is a super weird effect that makes no sense. Maybe the druid takes that.

ACF's: As was noted above, anthropomorphic bat grants access to fangshields druid substitution levels. Wild shape hands at 5th is an absolute must pick, given the twin facts that it's totally free and super weird. The other two trades are nice, but spontaneous cure light wounds isn't a great fit and humanoid forms aren't going to be all that important when you really want to be aberrationing as much as possible. Iron constitution is always a great pick up, and defense against nauseated, sickened, and diseases fits well. Also from cityscape is voice of the city, which doesn't fit great, but it fits better than wild empathy.

Prestige Classes: Most of the good prestige classes don't fit all that well with this build. The closest to making sense is talontar blightlord, but this has two big issues. First, you need two feats, but aberration wild shape really eats up a lot of feat space. Adding flaws to the build can deal with this problem. Second, you need to be evil. Besides the basic issues with running evil characters, this represents a unique problem with this build, because you want to be using the sanctified spell animate

with the spirit, as it's your best undead type spell. If you feel like you can eschew that spell, or if your DM is willing to ditch the alignment restriction, this class is a really close thematic fit, probably for one level but maybe for two.

Contemplative is always a strong dip, especially if you have blightlord, and this build can use it in the classic way, picking up a generically great domain like spell (which will give access to a bunch of thematic options from off-list with anyspell), or you can pick something themed like undeath or madness. Not the best domains around for a druid, but they add some nice stuff. Holt warden isn't precisely a themed choice, but it's always an excellent lead in to contemplative if you don't have talontar blightlord. And, y'know, it's stronger than blightlord as well.

Magic Items: There's honestly not all that much out there that's both good and thematically pertinent in the field of magic items. Generally speaking, I'd advise sticking to generic good stuff. The one possible exception is the skin of kaletor. It's incredibly powerful, directly pertinent to this build's wild shape focus, and has a super aberrant feel to it. Apart from that, I'd advise just checking out the magic item section. A ring of the beast is always good, y'know?

Animal Companions: For this, there are two or three big possibilities, suitable for this build primarily for how frigging weird they are. Animal companions are, by and large, really normal. Almost aggressively normal. They're all stuff you could find in reality, a part of the natural world, and what could be worse for a druid built on incongruity than a perfectly normal animal companion? I suppose one could argue that that normal companion could serve to highlight the weirdness of the druid, but that's going a bit too deep for my taste. The goal here, after all, is not to somehow trick theming, but is instead to embrace it.

Anyway, the first animal companion of interest is the sailsnake. This one is neat because it combines two elements that are usually held apart, flight and the whole poisonous snake thing. And this isn't just the game typically holding these things apart. While the occasional snake does have the ability to glide, the actual flight speed this creature has is, to my knowledge, not found in nature. The poison itself

is super weird too, with the blinding effect having its duration halved on a successful save. It makes the sailsnake quite good, because the effect is hard to defend against, but, more importantly, it makes it rather unique, because if that specific save result shows up elsewhere, I'm not aware of it. Also, the poisoning plays into the undead side of things with the feel of death and debilitation, though it'd certainly work better for that if it did ability damage or something.

The second animal companion is the watchspider. The big oddity here is the typing. It's a frigging magical beast. Animal companions may have once been magical beasts, but they are that no longer, except this one totally is, because the type is right there. You can do some cool stuff with that typing, mostly because magical beasts, unlike animals, can have their intelligence altered without screwing up the game, and that makes for a very unusual set of potential abilities for an animal companion, but just the fact that the type is there is enough to make this worth recommending. The type weirdness doesn't even end there, because, while one might expect this to be just an animal with strange typing and some subtle differences, it reads a whole lot more like a vermin with strange typing and some subtle differences. It is a spider, after all, with all that entails, including a weird web ability that lets the party cross pits and such, and an ability damage poison that, as is the case with the sailsnake, bolsters the undead theming.

The third and final animal companion I'll highlight here is the fforge, which is also the highest level of the three. Unlike most animal companions (aside from the aforementioned watchspider, of course), most animal companions are standard animals. The fforge, however, is an extraplanar animal, and is basically some crazy amalgam of other animals. It has the double damage on a charge of a rhino, a weird variant on the improved grab technique of a giant crocodile (here in the form of grab+worry), the ferocity of a boar, and the rage of a badger. The result is a creature at odds with itself, an animal that, if not by its abilities, then at least by its essential nature as a creature not of this world, is deeply unnatural.

Wild Shape: Naturally, a lot of your wild shape use, at least once you hit level nine, is going to be all about aberrations. You'll pull out nilshai for the multiple

actions, and will-o'-wisp for its defenses, and any number of other things that are amazing because aberration forms are frequently amazing. This handbook has a whole half-section devoted to nothing but crazy aberration forms, and I would advise looking through it before running this build or aberration wild shape in general. This section you're reading right now, however, isn't just about aberration forms in that general sense. Instead, because the aberration half of wild shape is fully covered by the ability to turn into them, this will be about the cross section between wild shape and undead stuff. Most of these will actually be plants, because there's a weird link between plants and undead, but there're a couple of aberrations on the list, which is great because it's such a direct expression of the core concept here.

First two forms I want to cover are the myconid sovereign and the yellow musk creeper, a pair of plant creatures that give about as close as you're going to get to a true animate dead effect. Of the two, the myconid sovereign is largely superior for this purpose. You can use the animation effect on any dead creature, not just one that you defeated in a specific way, the zombies clearly follow you, rather than the monster you've become, meaning that the yellow musk creeper might lose control over the zombies once you swap forms, and myconid sovereign is large rather than huge, meaning much earlier access. The creeper does have a few advantages though. First, it's just generally a better form. Actually being a myconid sovereign kinda sucks, while the creeper offers combat utility that makes it worth using even if you're not animating dead. Second, the zombies have their type changed to plant, rather than kept the same as the base creature, meaning abilities that more closely mimic a true undead. Third, the process of zombification happens faster, seeming to occur instantly after intelligence is fully drained, as opposed to the 1d4 days of the sovereign. And, finally, the creeper's zombies serve you for two months, while the sovereign's zombies decay within 1d6 weeks. Overall, I'd generally stick with the myconid sovereign, because there's just less hassle associated with the whole process, but the yellow musk creeper has its place.

Next up is a creature that gets a little further from pure animate dead action, but a little closer to awesome aberration insanity, the deepspawn. The deepspawn is

notable here for, first, the apparent ability to usually come accompanied by some minions, and second, and far more critically, the ability to create those minions, randomly chosen copies of creatures you've devoured, where said copies can only fit a few prescribed templates. The basic idea behind the optimization of that ability is that you only devour NPC adventurers with useful classes of level six, meaning that you always spawn those adventurers (because NPC adventurers of level six and below are an allowed spawn), and then you have access to an infinite supply of these reasonable NPC's, NPC's fanatically loyal to you, limited only by the 4d6 day delay between spawn. The reason this is particularly great for you is because you're basically bringing back dead creatures to fight for you, and that fits the necromancy shtick perfectly.

Finally, here are five creatures that have abilities that fit in with this plan, but aren't super interesting. Just regular interesting. First, there's the dolghast, which just straight up gets undead traits. You can get roughly similar immunity piles, but few can lay claim to actually making you kinda undead. It's a solid angle on the undead theme. The next three are the boneleaf, the mindstealer master, and neogi old master. All of these forms create minions, of various levels of power and allegiance to you, but none of those minions are flavored as effectively undead in any way. Still, necromancers have minions, and these things give minions, and that counts for something. These shouldn't necessarily be your focus, but they could be worth tossing into your minion rotation. Finally, there's the gutpuppet, which seemingly lets you walk a corpse around, but the mechanics behind it are a bit murky to be dependable, and doing it doesn't grant all that much benefit.

Spells: There's really not that much on the spell list that fits aberration theming, so the main focus here is going to be on necromancy, mixed in, of course, with whatever generically good druid spells make sense. One of the big problems to contend with is that animate with the spirit, a sanctified spell is one of your best undead style effects. This conflicts somewhat with the fact that corrupt spells, especially absorb mind, consume likeness, and putrefaction (particularly putrefaction, cause it does reanimation great, but it's super high level), are pretty well suited to a necromancy feel as well. You're going to want to be neutral on the

good/evil axis so you can use all these spells, but be careful not to go too deep on the corrupt stuff lest you lose access to animate. They can be pretty nice though, so a couple of others could be used as seasoning.

From there, you have the super direct undead stuff. Bone talisman grants you some undead turning, ghost companion can make you and/or your animal companion into a ghost, and blackwater tentacles, SNA IV for a yellow musk creeper, or SNA VIII for a sporebat, can grant negative levels to make some undead. Other than that, some other good undead style effects are blood snow, moon bolt, and mummify. Anything that nauseates or deals ability damage/drain is nice as well, the former especially given iron constitution. It's not the longest list in the world, but a relatively small number of reanimation effects can go a long way, and filling the gaps with stuff that feels right can get the feeling across.