Firefox – Selected features

by Andy Pepperdine

Introduction

The intention in this paper is to outline some of the menu items, tabs, and other features in recent versions of Firefox.

The specific one I am using for this is Firefox 58.0 (64-bit) running on Linux Mint.

Address bar

The address bar is the text space where you write an address of a page you wish to visit. Included in this space are various other icons and buttons that relate to the page being displayed. If you pause the mouse over each of the icons, more information is made visible.

History

If you mouse over the URL in the address bar, you should see a little V to the right of the text of the URL. Clicking on that will show a list of the current history that has been accumulated according to your preferences. (See also Preferences below).

I have tried various settings for saving history, but it seems Firefox shows only some of the URLs you visit, and I can't see any reason why some and not others.

However, to see your full history at any time, then use the **History** menu, the **Library** icon (see later), or the main menu.

Enter Reader View

Clicking on this button (looks like a page of text), will strip out a lot of extraneous imagery and other formatting, and merely display the essential text of the referenced page. Unfortunately, it may also strip out a lot of other things you may wish to read.

Also in the View, there are other features available from buttons on the left side. These are, from the top:

Close Reader View returns to normal browsing mode.

Type Controls gives options to change the font between Serif and Sans-serif; to decrease and increase the size of the text; to reduce or expand the size of the column of text; To reduce or expand the distance between lines of text; or to change background colour between white, sepia or black (with white text).

Narrate will read the text out loud. I have not tried all combinations, so do not know what languages are available, for instance. You can change volume, and speed of the narration.

Save to Pocket is a feature explained later.

Page actions

This icon (three dots horizontally aligned) provides a few of what Mozilla are common action you may wish to perform.

Bookmark This page is obvious.

Save Page to Pocket is described below under Pocket

Copy Link just copies the link to the current page to the clipboard so it can be pasted into some other application, like a mail message or document.

Email Link starts up a composition window in your e-mail application (typically Thunderbird), and places into it the link. You then have to supply Subject, Recipients, and any other text may wish to send. I have not tried all combinations here, and it is possible that you ought to have Thunderbird open already before some features can be used.

Send Tab to Device is useful only if you have connected more than one device to your sync account.

Take a Screenshot enables you to preserve a particular window content for later use, say in a document, or it can upload directly to a website. There are various options on what region of the window you want to select.

Save to Pocket

Pocket is a free internet service that enables you8 to save links for recovery later, possibly on a different device. You will need an account at Pocket to be able to make use of it. For those of you who use several different devices at different places, this could be useful way of ensuring that you do not lose your bookmarks when travelling.

Pocket used to be an independent service, but now Mozilla have integrated their service into Firefox. They also allow you to use a Sync Mozilla login to be used to establish and access an account at Pocket.

There is a version of Firefox that runs on Android, but it does automatically include Pocket on its toolbar. However, by installing the Pocket app, you can then login via your Firefox account and see what you have there. Saving to Pocket from Android is via the Share menu item from any application that supports sharing. You can find Share usually from the main menu, or option menu of a browser. Select Share, and then look for Pocket in the list of options.

If you do not want Pocket, then it can be disabled, but only by changing the contents of the configuration file, with the associated risks.[1]

Bookmark this page (Ctrl+D)

Does the obvious, it provides a dialog whereby you can slot the bookmark into the appropriate place in your bookmark structure.

[Optional] extension icons

Some extensions can place icons in the address bar to provide further information about the site. One example is Country Flags & IP Whois.

Search Bar

The Search Bar is where you can place search terms at any time, and after hitting Enter it will create a new tab and use the default search engine to look up those terms. The default search engine can be set according to your wishes by clicking on the search icon (like a stylised magnifying glass) and then selecting Change Search Settings, where you will find several options and engines available.

Some webpages that provide search facilities also have buttons to allow them to insert themselves into the available list of engines from which you can select.

Tool Bar

The Address and Search Bars sit on the Tool Bar, which is always accessible. This is where you will also find other features represented as icons, and where most extensions place there preference buttons or information icons. However, there are two that seem to be defaulted by Firefox and placed on the right side of the Tool Bar. These are listed below.

Show sidebars

This icon looks like a small rectangle divided into two by a vertical line, and will show or remove the sidebar containing a list of bookmarks. It is a different way of allowing access to your bookmarks if you have disabled the Bookmarks Toolbar.

Library

This icon is a set of vertical lines, perhaps representing a row of books on a shelf. Clicking this will provide a menu to allow you easily to see your history of pages seen, bookmarks kept and other items.

Bookmarks opens a menu to go directly to any of your recently acquired bookmarks, where it seems "recent" is a rather elastic concept. Clicking on any of them takes you straight there.

At the bottom of the list, you can open up the bookmark editor.

View Pocket List takes you to yopur saved items in Pocket, or the login page if you have not yet visited it this session.

History gives you a menu containing your recent history, and selecting any item in the list will return to that site.

Downloads exposes the files that it has recorded that it has downloaded. It also gives the option taking you to the download folder for you to select from there.

Synced Tabs shows the tabs you have asked to be synchronised between devices. This gives the chance to look again on one device that you had previously found on another device.

Screenshots allows you to view what you have saved. To take a screenshot in Firefox, use the Right click within a window, where you will see the appropriate menu item.

Access to main features

The way to see the features that are commonly required, is via the last icon on the Toolbar at the top right consisting of three horizontal lines. Each of these items is described in sequence below.

→ **Sign-in to Sync**

Mozilla, who develop and maintain Firefox, have provided a server that can contain your bookmarks, and other items, so that they can be transferred easily to other devices, such as desktops, laptops, tablets and phones. To make use of this feature, you have to have an account on their server, and this is the way you can log in to that account in order to access your data.

You can get Firefox as an app for Android devices for phones and tablets, and then synchronise them with your main machine. In this way they can all be at the latest state of the last one you used.

You can preserve what Tabs are open, what bookmarks you have, the logins and passwords, your recent history, which add-ons you use, and your preferences, or any combination of these. To select which ones, the Firefox Account tab of your Preferences can adjust these if your change you mind as to what you wish to keep.

Note that Mozilla keep the data encrypted with your Account password. This means that if they get hacked and/or someone gets your password, the they will have access to your data stored there.

→ **New Window**

This will start a new instance of Firefox in a new window. It will contain your homepage as though you have started Firefox afresh. The browsing will be independent of the original window. On exit, its history and cookies will be merged with the starting window according to your preferences.

It is also accessible using the key combination Ctrl-N.

An alternative way is to use a right click when following a link, where one of the options is to load the new site in a new window.

If you have a tab that you wish to separate from the other tabs in the window, then Right-click on the tab will show you a menu, one of whose elements is to move it to a new window. This might be useful, for instance, to distinguish different parts of your research.

→ **New Private Window**

This starts a new window , but its history will be automatically deleted at the end. This is useful when using some else's machine and you do not want anything left behind.

It is also accessible using the key combination Ctrl-Shift-P. [Note, this combination also works on several other browsers for this same purpose.]

Private browsing can also be started from the command line using the *-private* option.

→ **Library**

This gives access to several features concerned with saving information about browsing, in the same was as the Library icon on the Toolbar does.

→ **Preferences**

This takes you to a new tab showing all your preferences for this session. Here are some of the parameters that were discussed at the meeting.

General → Startup: You can set a webpage that is always fetched when Firefox starts up by setting "Show youR home page"., and then defining the Home Page.

Search → Search Bar: Here you can say whether you want the search bar to appear in your Toolbar. You can also fetch search engines, other than the ones built-in by Mozilla.

Privacy & Security → Forms & Passwords: You can ask Firefox to save your login details and passwords for you. If you do, then you can also protect those passwords from others by setting a single master password that you will have to put in every time you want to use a site that requires one of those passwords.

Although if someone steals your laptop while you have Firefox open and using its password list, they then have access to all your sites. However, they will not be able to see your passwords in clear text without knowing you master password.

If they steal it but Firefox is not open, then they cannot unlock the password list without your master password.

Privacy & Security → History: If you set the dropdown to "Use custom settings for history", and then do not tick "Remember my browsing and download history", it will not record any of the history, and cannot provide hints when typing in addresses. There is a similar button to turn off/on the Search history.

Firefox Account → Sync Settings: Here you can determine what aspects of your Firefox installations will be synchronised between devices. (See "Sign-in to Sync" above).

→ Customise …

This is where you can change the appearance of your window.

To select what Toolbars are visible click on the Toolbars button at the bottom of the screen, where you can hide the Menu Bar and/or the Bookmarks Bar. You may wish to do this on a small screen to save vertical space.

To place a function in the Tool Bar, drag and drop the icon onto the toolbar and move it to where you want to see it. You can also add a tool to the Bookmarks bar, so that if you can see this bar, then the feature is available, and not taking space in the Tool Bar.

To change the position of an icon, just drag it to where you want it to be.

Themes are also available to change the background of the Tool Bars. Some would prefer the Dark option that puts white text on a black background, and is easier to read in certain conditions. This is found on the Themes button at the bottom of the pane.

Density of the text can be changed by the Density button, although it seemed to make no difference on my setup.

File menu

This is where you find any control of tabs, files, and webpages.

File → New Tab

This obviously creates a new tab, which contains a so-called Blank Page, and has the very basic starting points that Firefox deem worthy of inserting there.

File → New Window

This will start a new instance of Firefox in a new window. It will contain your homepage as though you have started Firefox afresh. The browsing will be independent of the original window. On exit, its history and cookies will be merged with the starting window according to your preferences.

File → New Private Window

This starts a new window , but its history will be automatically deleted at the end. This is useful when using some else's machine and you do not want anything left behind.

File → Open File...

Firefox can not only display webpages read over the internet connection, but also a suitable file in your own file system. This menu option allows you to browse your file system and select the file you wish to see displayed when its content is interpreted. If you want to edit the text, then an alternative editor may be more relevant.

File → Save Page As...

This will take the current page you are displaying and save it in your own file system.

File → Email Link...

This will start up your e-mail application and present you with a composition window containing the link to the page you are looking at, and ready for you to supply any further text, subject and recipient.

File → Print Preview

This will show you what will be printed should you print the page out. To return to browsing, either hit the Close button in the preview window, or hit the escape key on the keyboard.

From this window, you can also adjust the size of the page, select portrait or landscape from buttons on the toolbar, and select relevant printer attributes by hitting the Page Setup button. When you are satisfied with the appearance, then you can print directly from this dialog.

File → Print…

This will take you straight to the printer menu to select pages, setup, number of copies, etc., like any other printing job.

File → Work Offline

This will allow you to disconnect from the network and work on the pages you have saved, or other files in your file system.

File → Quit

Obvious.

Bookmarks Menu

This menu contains several items that enable you to manage your bookmarks.

Bookmarks → Show All Bookmarks

This will open a dialog that enables you to see all your current bookmarks, and to edit the list. You can move them from one part of the structure to another by the usual drag and drop, as though they were items in a file system.

Context menu (right click)

The contents will vary according to where the cursor is located at the time. It is always worthwhile trying it to see what is there. Some plces it may be of use are given below.

On a tab

This will allow you to duplicate a tab, move it to a new window, bookmark all the tabs, and various other things. One thing you may not be aware of are:

Pinned tabs: These are tabs that cannot be accidentally deleted, and can be set to load automatically when you start Firefox. So as well as a single Home Page, you can have a number of favourite sites all loaded at start-up. [2]

For instance, if you use webmail, then by putting this page as a pinned tab, it will always be available quickly, and will alert you when new mail arrives, without occupying space on the tab bar.

Other keyboard commands

There are still other key combinations that can be used to obtain some possibly useful features. [3]

I only mention a few, and let you scan the reference for others you might want to use.

Find on Page (Ctrl-F)

This opens a little text box at the bottom of the window so you can type in text to search for on the page being shown.

F3 will then move to the next place where the search string exists.

Esc then closes the find bar when you have finished.

View Source (Ctrl-U)

This command will show in a new tab the actual html code for the page being displayed. This can be useful if you find that something is not as you might expect. It will demonstrate how many other sites are being accessed just to display the one you are interested in.

Navigation

Page Down and **Page Up** are equivalent to scrolling a full page in the obvious direction.

Home and **End** go to the top or bottom of a page.

Alt-**left**-**arrow** and **Alt**-**right**-**arrow** load the previous or next page in the tab.

Ctrl-**Tab** shifts the focus to the next tab to the right. **Ctrl**-**Shift**-**Tab** opens the tab to the left.

Add-ons

In the meeting, a couple of add-ons were also mentioned.

Country Flags & IP Whois

This puts a little country flag in the address bar. Hovering the mouse over it shows the country where thinks the server is located, and its IP address. Clicking on the flag gives a lot more information about that site, such as where it is registered, who it is registered to, detailed location data, and whether it is on any spam lists and other data.

Lightbeam

This collects all the links contained in all the pages you visit. If you leave it running, over time it will be able to collate these links into a network of sites that potentially could know about you. In practice, only some of them actually do collect data, but after a couple of months it may surprise you just how widespread the network becomes.

When I asked it to show the graph, it took about 40 seconds to build the complete graph and reported that since 19 November 2017, I had visited 316 sites, which led to 1340 third party sites.

Lightbeam shows the sites that could see where you are going. But if you use protection from trackers (like Privacy Badger), then most will not actually see you.

References

[1] Disabling Pocket: https://support.mozilla.org/en-US/kb/disable-or-re-enable-pocket-for-firefox

[2] Pinned tabs: https://support.mozilla.org/en-US/kb/pinned-tabs-keep-favorite-websites-open

[3] Keys: https://support.mozilla.org/en-US/kb/keyboard-shortcuts-perform-firefox-tasks-quickly is a comprehensive list of all the features available directly from the keyboard.