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Subset: Hunting

## **Field Care of Harvested Big Game**

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You have your deer down. Your hunting skill and persistence have paid off. Now what do you do? The knowledge you utilize next will determine the quality of your big game trophy at the table. Proper care of harvested game is the most important criteria to ensure its value as table fare. This publication was prepared to assist you in the proper care of your game in the field.

Deer are used as examples in the following procedures. The information can also be applied to other big game animals.

### **Bleeding**

Bleeding your trophy is not always required. If the animal has been shot in the chest area, or if a major artery has been severed, sufficient loss of blood has occurred. However, bleeding may be necessary if the animal has been downed with a shot in the spinal area. Before proceeding, touch the animal's eyes with a stick or the muzzle of your rifle to be sure it is dead and not merely stunned.

A single cut, entering the throat at the junction of the neck and body, will sever one or both of the carotid arteries (figure 1). This cut should be only large enough to allow blood to flow freely. Large, gaping holes are not necessary. Be especially careful if you intend to have the head mounted. (Top)

### **Field Dressing**

Tag the animal immediately to comply with game laws.

Before beginning, be sure your knife is sharp. Unintentional cuts can be minimized with a sharp knife and the entire job will require less effort. Take your time. Mistakes made through haste usually make the job more difficult than necessary. You might want to consider wearing disposable gloves.

Some hunters feel it is necessary to remove the tarsal glands inside the knee between the hind legs but this is not necessary. The male deer has similar glands in other places and these can also be left intact. It is important, however, to avoid touching the meat after touching any glands, waste or hair.

Prop the animal on its back and begin field dressing by removing the animal's genitals (figure 2). Separate the penis from the abdomen by cutting the skin and connective tissue back to the testicles. The tubes running from the penis to testicle area should not be severed.

If the animal is a female, the mammarys and sex organ should be removed. If the animal is a male, remove the testicles where they join the body.

Cut through the muscle down to the pelvic bone (figure 3). This cut is made exactly between the hind legs. One of the hind roasts will be damaged if you do not center this cut.

Cut the skin and muscle around the anus. This can be done easily with the same cutting action used to core an apple. This cut should be 3 or 4 inches deep. After the anus is free, pull this vent area out a few inches and tie it off with a short piece of string.

Now turn the knife, blade side up and make a cut from the pelvis up to the breastbone (figure 4). Use two fingers on your hand not holding the knife to keep entrails away from the point of the blade.

Extend the cut through the breastbone and up into the chest cavity. Do not cut farther forward than a line between the front legs if you plan to save the cape. Reach as far forward as possible and sever the esophagus and windpipe. Pull the lungs and heart to one side, then cut the thin layer of muscle (diaphragm) separating the heart and lungs from the stomach away from the rib cage.

When cutting through the diaphragm, be careful not to puncture the stomach.

You can now pull the entrails free from the carcass (figure 5). Pull the vent through the pelvis. It may be necessary to cut some connective tissue as entrails are pulled free. The animal is now field dressed.

Wipe out all blood or other loose material inside the body cavity. If you use water be sure to dry with an absorbent cloth.

Keep the body cavity clean while dragging your deer from the field. Do not allow sand or other foreign material to contaminate the carcass. A little extra effort at this point will result in higher quality venison.

The carcass must be cooled as soon as possible. Prop the body cavity open with a stick and split the pelvis. This can usually be done with a knife if the animal is small. A hatchet or saw may be needed if it is a larger deer.

The carcass should be skinned if the temperature is expected to stay above freezing the first night after the kill. Keep the carcass in the shade. The carcass should be taken to a cooler the day of the kill if the weather is warm. Make sure the internal temperature of the meat is cooled to 40 degrees F or below within 24 hours. Use cheesecloth or light cotton bags to keep the carcass clean and to protect the meat from insects. (Top)

## **Skinning**

### *Skinning the Trophy Head*

Special care is needed if you want the head to be mounted for your trophy room, or if you want to sell the scalp to a taxidermist.

Start skinning with a cut along the upper side of the neck (figure 6). This cut should go from a point behind the front legs to a point between the antlers. Make another cut connecting the antlers. Make a third cut completely around the chest area of the deer directly behind the front legs.

Pull the hide free from the flesh using the knife as little as possible. Be extra careful around the eyes and tear-duct area in the inside corner of the eye. It may help to put

your finger in the deer's eye from the outside and cut the connective tissue around the eye from the inside -- but be careful.

The ears can be cut off close to the skull. Leave enough of the lip connected so the taxidermist can split the lip from the inside to make a realistic mount.

Use your finger or a blunt object to separate the hide from the outer side of the ear cartilage. Be sure to do this all the way to the tip of the ear.

Remove all meat from the scalp and salt the hide liberally. Roll with flesh side in and allow to drain for 24 hours. Re-salt until all moisture is removed. Store in a cool, dry place until all moisture is removed, and until the scalp can be taken to the taxidermist. Antlers should be sawed from the skull (figure 7), all meat and tissue should be removed.

### *Skinning the Deer*

The carcass can be hung from either the head or the hind legs for skinning.

Begin by making the cuts shown in figure 8. Remove the hide by grasping the skin and pulling hard with both hands. Use your knife as little possible. Use your fist where the body is difficult to separate from the hide.

If flesh pulls off with the skin, stop pulling and try again after cutting the flesh back with the skinning knife. When the deer is skinned head up it is less likely that the thin muscles of the abdomen will pull off with the hide.

Don't forget to care for your deer hide by salting it heavily and rolling it up. Many places pay cash for hides or scalps, or you can have gloves or other garments made from them.

Proper care of harvested game is the most important criteria to ensure its value as table fare.

- If bleeding is necessary, make a small cut at the junction of the head and body.
- Cut under the genitals and remove back to the testicles.
- Cut to the pelvic bone exactly between the hind legs.
- Make a cut from the pelvis to the breastbone.
- Pull the entrails free from the cavity.
- To remove cape, make a cut along the back of the neck and between the antlers.
- Remove the antlers from the skull by sawing as indicated.
- To remove the hide, make preliminary cuts as indicated