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Storing Hides

So They are in Optimum Condition for Tanning

Intro

You want to store hides so that they are in optimum condition for tanning: uniformly moist, and protected from rot, dogs, ring-tails, bears and bugs.



This hide wasn't stored so good.

How to store hides

Freeze. Roll hide up in tight bundle, tie, put in plastic bag, and freeze indefinitely. You can flesh first to reduce volume. If you have the freezer space, this is the easiest way to go.

Wet-salt. Lay hide out flat with the flesh side facing up. Spread fine salt over the entire surface, all the way out to the edges. Don't skimp, salt is cheap. To salt the next hide, lay it directly on top of the first, and so on. Allow the salt to soak in overnight. Store in cool place with no air flow, so they won't dry out. Use air-tight plastic and wooden containers. Salt will rust metal, which will then stain the hide. One or two hides will fit in a five gallon plastic bucket, while a big pile can be put into a garbage can. After one week drain any water that has accumulated at the bottom of the container. Will store at least one year. This is the most practical method for people who tan alot of hides.

Storing salted hides in tarps or other permeable containers causes them to dry slowly over time. The more they dry the harder they will be to scrape later. Even if they feel damp and pliable they may still have dried enough to affect scraping. Wet-salted hides should feel as loose as when they first came off of the deer.

The only way to really screw this up is by storing salted hides directly on the ground. Some-how the ground causes the hides to rot over time.

Scrape fresh and then dry. To do this, you must flesh, buck, grain and rinse. Then you can dry the hide out and store it indefinitely. Drying unscraped hides makes them considerably harder to scrape later. So, if you take them through the grain scraping stage and then dry them, you are not creating any unnecessary work for yourself. It takes an experienced tanner about an hour's work to get their hide to this point (not including soaking time). It might take a beginner four or five hours. Use The Basic Method.

Drying Hides For Storage Can Make Tanning Harder

For four years, I fleshed and dried my hides for storage. Many brain-tanners do this. This is fine for dry-scraping. For wet-scraping this can make it much harder to remove the grain. Drying shrinks the grain and causes it to adhere tightly to the fiber core. When re-soaked, it doesn't reconstitute fully.

Think of a dried apple...When reconstituted, no matter how long it soaks or is manipulated, is it ever as soft, full and luscious as a fresh apple?

No...and the same is true of hide grain. The grain will never swell and loosen to be as easy to remove as on fresh hides.

There are however a couple of exceptions to this rule. Hides that have been stored dry for more than a year will grain fairly easily. Hides that have been stored dry for a few years are exceptionally easy to grain and soften. In fact there is no need to do the bucking or rinsing steps. The aging process has an effect similar to the alkali, causing the mucus in the grain layer to break down. This allows the dressing to easily enter and prepare the hide for softening. So if you have some old hides out in the shed, soak them up in plain water for a day or two and go at it.

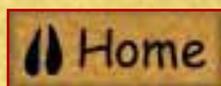
Using the bucking process as illustrated in [Deerskins into Buckskins](#) makes dried hides scrape considerably easier than they otherwise do, so I don't discourage it as much as I did in the past. If you do not have an environmentally responsible way to dispose of salt, no freezer, and you're tanning a lot of hides, this may be your only option. Give the hide a very thorough fleshing job because any fat left on the hide will rot and weaken it. Dry in a fairly warm place so that the hide dries before it rots. Check the edges periodically as they have a tendency to curl up and hold moisture in.

Hides dried hair-on need to be protected from bugs, especially once spring rolls around. The omnipresent nasty hide beetles will infest and chew holes in any skins stored dry with the hair on; unless stored where the bugs can't get them, or in a smokey spot. The hide beetles don't like the flavor of smokey hides. These cruel bugs also don't like to munch hairless hides. This is another good reason to scrape the grain off of your hides before drying them. Getting a hide to this point only takes about one hour or two of work for an experienced tanner. This won't be too much work at once unless you are tanning 30+ hides. In that case you have to deal with the realities of mass production, however you see fit.

Another Option

You can soak your hides in the buck and rinse them before storing. Then store them using any of these methods. The advantage of this is that you can make just one batch of solution and put all of your hides through the bucking process at once. Then your hides will be immediately ready to scrape whenever you are, rather than having to wait for them to go through the bucking process. The disadvantage is that you don't get the easier scraping that swollen hides provide. It also takes considerably longer for the hide to rinse; about 48 hrs. in moving water. I encourage you to leave them in the buck and in the rinse a little longer than necessary, to make sure that the whole batch is fully treated and ready. You might as well since you are not in a hurry to scrape them, and it doesn't create any more work for you.

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How to Skin Deer, Elk, Antelope, Goat, or Sheep

Intro

Skinning is a straight forward endeavor if you follow the body's built in guidelines. This is because the skin and muscle tissue are naturally separated from one another by protective membranes. Simply make the initial cuts, and then pull the skin off, as if you are removing the deer's coat. When you peel the skin, it easily separates from the meat along these membranes. After getting a clean start, there is little risk of tearing the skin or the meat. So all you need to do is use your hands and body weight to pull and pry the skin from the deer. It is generally a ten to fifteen minute process.

The biggest mistake you can make is trying to cut the hide off with your knife. When you use a knife to slice the hide from the deer you inevitably violate these layers, making the whole job harder. Once the meat is cut into, you are no longer working with the natural division between meat and hide. You usually end up removing large chunks of meat, as well as putting cuts and holes in the hide. These cuts (also called scores) and holes open up and enlarge easily, increasing the amount of work at every stage of the tanning process.

The membranes that encase the meat also protect it from flies and deer hair. When you cut into the meat you create moist and protected habitats for flies to lay their eggs in. If you peel the skin, the muscle layers remain intact, the outer membranes dry out, and flies will not lay their eggs. For some reason, most modern hunters do not know this and that makes finding well skinned hides a real challenge. There are absolutely no advantages to knifing a skin off. It is not faster!

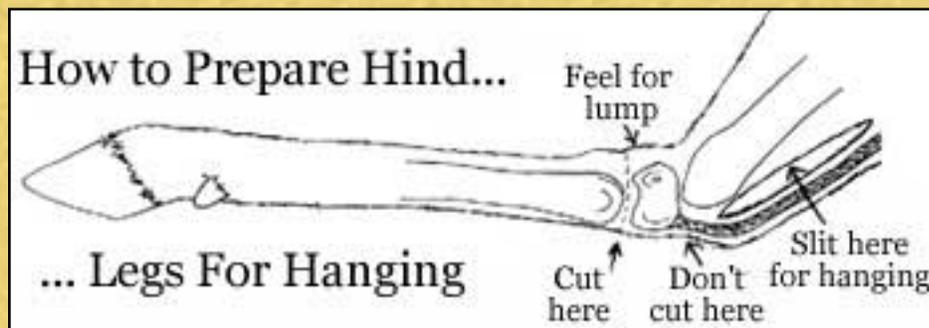
How To Skin

Hanging the deer makes it easy to use your body weight to pull the skin off. It also assures that the meat will stay clean. You can either hang it from the neck or from the legs. Most people prefer one way or the

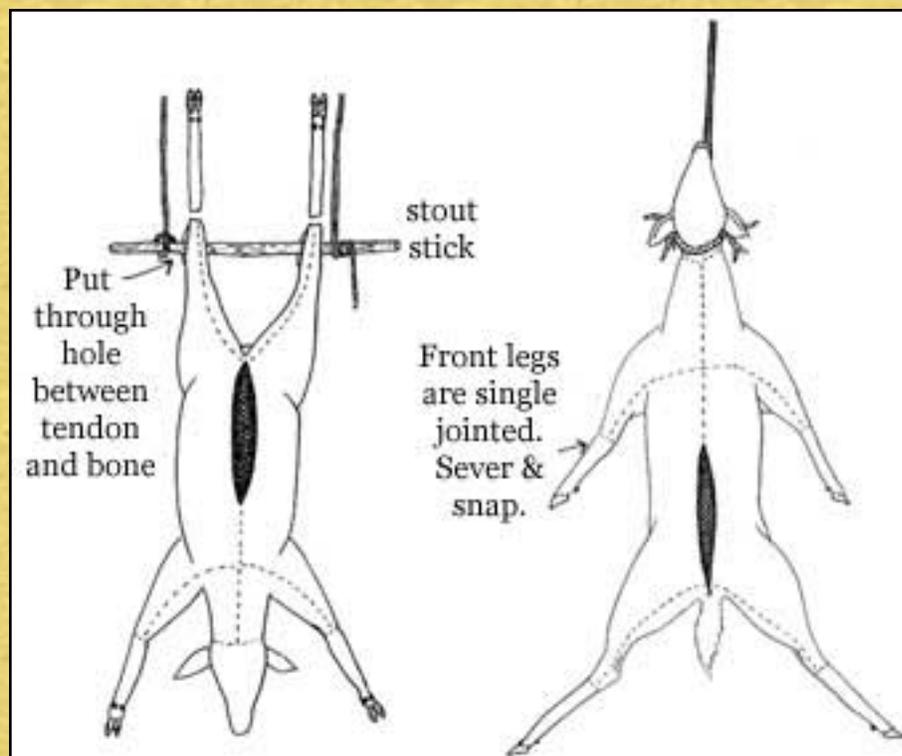
other. I like them both. Deer should be hung using strong ropes (I had one fall on me once when the rope broke. The antler tines hit my forehead. Those things hurt!). Do it within a few hours of the deer's death and it will peel off especially easily. Make sure your knife is sharp, and proceed as follows:

If you want to get better hides, tell your friends who hunt about good skinning techniques, or post a flyer around town.

To hang a deer by its back legs, find the large tendon that connects the lowest leg segment with the rest of the leg. Poke a hole in between that tendon and the leg bone. Use your fingers to feel the lump that is created by the double jointed bone. Then sever the lower leg at the lower of the two joints as illustrated.



Cut skin and tendons around the joint, then snap it over your leg.



Make the incisions as shown in the illustration. Once you've made the initial incisions, put that knife down. Then use your hands and body to pull, yank, and pry the skin from the deer.



Getting a clean start: use finger tips and thumbs to separate the hide from the meat. Notice how clean and encased both the meat and hide are.

Once you've gotten a good start, grab the hide with your hands and pull. You can also push your thumbs, fist and elbows in-between the skin and meat to release areas that are sticking.



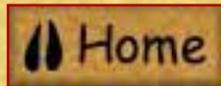
Use your body weight to help pull.

There will be a very thin layer of meat that wants to come off with the hide. This is the muscle that the deer uses to twitch flies off of its back. Nobody that I know of eats this meat because it is so thin and membraney. It is easily fleshed off later, so most folks let it come off with the hide.

Removing The Brains

Deer conveniently come with just enough brains to tan their own skin. If you are planning to tan the hide right away, the simplest place to store the brains is in the intact skull. To remove the brains from the skull you first need to cut away the skin that covers the area between the eyes and the back of the antlers (on Does just go to where the antlers would be). Then use a hacksaw to make a V shaped cut into the skull. The antlers can be used as a lever to remove the cut bone. A messier but equally effective alternative is to smash this section of skull with a stone. Be careful not to cut yourself on bone shards. Once the skull is open use a spoon, fingers or straw to remove all of the brains. Protect the brains from flies.

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Obtaining Hides

Where to Get Them Cheap or Free

Intro

There are lots of free and cheap hides available every hunting season and frequently in-between. With a little effort you should be able to find all that you could ever want. However it is a bit trickier finding hides that haven't been knifed up in the [skinning](#). Tanning hides that have been skinned well is a joy. Tanning knifed up skins takes longer in nearly every stage, and the finished product is not nearly as good. Go to extra lengths to get good skins. If you are buying deerskins, it is always worth a few extra bucks for really good ones.

While this chapter is geared particularly toward the obtaining of deer hides, you can also find elk, antelope, moose, goat, and buffalo. Deer are by far the most common, and most commonly wasted hides in North America. They are also a good one to start your tanning adventures with. Elk are much more work to tan and because of their fiber structure, they are weaker and wear out faster than deer. This is just a relative comparison. Elk leather is beautiful, large, thick and perfectly fine for many applications. Moose on the other hand has the fiber quality of deer but the thickness of moose. They are particularly great for moccasins. Antelope and big-horn sheep are renowned for being uniformly thin. They will make light-weight, comfortable dresses and summer clothing.

Where to get good skins

Deer you hunt yourself. What could be more satisfying than pulling on a deerskin jacket from deer that fed you and your family? Obviously do not hunt deer just to get more skins. There are a zillion out there going to waste.

Friends who hunt. If you know lots of folks who hunt, just tell them you want the skin, and most would love to give it to you. Have a handout to give them on good skinning techniques or offer to skin for them. (feel free to print out the pages on [skinning](#)).

Roadkills. More than 300,000 deer are hit annually in the United States. You can get lots of free, perfectly skinned hides, with no bullet holes. It may be illegal in your area, so check it out. Skin the deer, remove any meat you will use, and return the carcass to somewhere that the critters can get to it safely, away from the road.

Skinning stations. Set up a free skinning station along a road that many hunters will use. This is especially effective during peak hunting weekends, and in regions where a large number of tags have been issued for an area with only a few main access roads. You can also offer to do it at your home, and advertise.

Roadside barrels. My friend Jim Riggs puts out two or three barrels every year with a sign that reads "hides and heads". Luckily most people interpret this to mean deer and elk. He gets all of the free hides and brains that he can use. If you try this be prepared to deal with some gross hides, yellow jackets and trash. You will also get alot of real crappy hides, but you will find some gems. Jim always wishes that the good skinners would autograph their hides so that he could meet them.

Rotting, smelly hides can give you an infection or blood poisoning real fast. If you handle any questionable hides, wash up really well afterwards with disinfectant soap and keep an eye on any cuts or sores. If you notice an unusual amount of swelling, or red streaks going from your cuts toward the chest, see a physician immediately.

Local butchers who do game processing. Look in the yellow pages under meat. There you will find a list of all local butchers who do game processing. Call them and ask them how much they charge, how many skins they get a season, etc.

They will all tell you that they do a really great skinning job. Most of them don't. It's really hard to see knife marks in frozen or wet salted hides, so check out a sample of their work before you make any big purchases. Either buy one frozen or salted hide or check out a freshly skinned hide if that is possible. Rinse the salt out of the salted hide. On the flesh side look for knife marks. These will appear as cuts in the skin or the meat. It is preferable to have none, but this is sadly rare.

As long as only one person is doing the skinning, the quality or lack of, will be consistent. If there are only a few knife marks on the edges and

none in the middle, this is good. If there are knife marks in the middle of the hide, this is the sign of a hide slasher. Avoid these. I shop around for the best skinners, and make a deal to get everything they skin that deer season. Tell them that you only want their hides, and not ones that hunters bring in.

Sometimes you can get a butcher to change his skinning practices so that he pulls the skin off (see [skinning](#)). This is rare, but worth the effort and paying a little more for it. A typical price for a deerskin from the butchers in 1997, is from four to eight dollars. Even better is to get a job skinning for a butcher during the opening week end of deer season, and get the hides for free.

Hide dealers and tanneries. Most big towns have someone who buys hides from hunters. If yours does, ask that person to put aside the very best. Offer to pay a dollar or two more than they are currently getting, for their best ones. Ask them to put aside twice as many as you actually want. Then go through the pile and pick out the best. This is a bit of a russian roulette since it is hard to see knife marks through the salt. If you explain to the dealer that you want the hides with the least knife marks, and then you go through them yourself, you will mostly get good ones.

Become a deer hide buyer and dealer. If your area doesn't have a hide buyer, you could become that person. Find out where the closest tannery is, and how much they will pay you per hide. Then buy hides at prices that will make it worth your while. A common deal is to offer free leather gloves in exchange for hides. These gloves are available wholesale for two to three bucks from Sullivan's Gloves, 1315 S.E. Armour Rd, Bend Oregon 97702. (541) 382-3092. You need to order 60 to get the wholesale price. Hunters like this. Advertise at hunting shops, etc.

You will be surprised how many you get, especially if you do it year after year. Most hunters would like to see their hides get used, just out of ethics. This way you can pick out the very best hides when they are fresh, plus make money reselling the others to the tannery. Have a flier to give hunters that illustrates [proper skinning](#) techniques. Offer more money for peeled hides.

By buying hides directly from hunters, you will not be encouraging folks to go out and kill deer to sell you the skin. The going rate for deerskins

is so low it would never be worth it. Rather, you are just giving them a little incentive to get their skin to someone who will use it, instead of leaving it in the woods or the trash.

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