

Preparing Wild Game for the Table:

Butchering

Some hunters prefer to take their deer to a local processor for butchering. By doing so, they forgo the work in favor of paying someone to do it. In situations where the hunter does not have time, an adequate location, or familiarity with the butchering process, a processor may be the logical option. However, with minimal knowledge and tools, a hunter can easily accomplish the task, save money, and be sure of eating their own deer.

There are many retailers today offering low cost butchering kits containing all the necessary items for the budget minded do-it-yourselfer. In fact, a deer sized animal can be adequately processed utilizing a tree or two, some rope, and a knife. Butchering can also be accomplished on the ground or on a large table by skinning and butchering one side at a time. Simply skin one side, remove all edible meat, flip the carcass over, skin and remove the meat again. Hanging lessens the chance of contaminating the carcass with ground debris, but that can be minimized by processing on a tarp or plastic sheeting.

Utilizing a sharp knife along with some basic knowledge about cuts of meat, a deer can be processed from field to freezer in a few hours or less. The critical need is a place to do the processing, and weather permitting, can be accomplished outside or inside a small shed or garage.

Although any knife can be used to butcher a deer, a boning knife is more suited to the job. Many butchering kits also contain skinning knives and a simple hand saw for cutting bones (*Note: cutting through bone is optional and is not necessary to adequately process a deer*).

Another relatively inexpensive tool critical to the process of butchering is a sharpening steel and no novice should be without one. The ability to maintain a sharp knife is important and sharpening steels are much easier to use than a sharpening stones.

The following simple steps will allow a hunter to butcher a deer for the minimum cost of a few hours utilizing the hanging method:

- Attach a piece of rope or cord to each of the rear legs of the deer by making an incision in the skin near the tarsal glands at the knee joint (*Note: Be very careful not to cut the large tendon because it provides support for hanging!*) Use a separate knife, or be sure to wash the boning knife, after cutting near the tarsal area, especially on male deer, to avoid tainting the meat when butchering (*Note: the tarsal area contains a nasty mix of urine and other secretions occurring during the breeding season which have the potential to alter the table quality of the meat*). Prop open the back legs of the deer by inserting a piece of rope in each leg at the tendon, make a knot, and tie each

leg to one, or separately to two individual trees. If inside a garage, ceiling rafters can be utilized. Many hunters butcher a deer head-down positioning the pelvic area at head-height, or slightly above, to the person doing the butchering. In this way, the deer will be off the ground and not too high for the person butchering. If you can afford it, an inexpensive game gambrel holds the deer legs apart and can be easily attached overhead according to the manufacturer's instructions. Many gambrels also have a system of rope and pulleys that adds the convenience of being able to hoist and lower the deer carcass if needed. (*Note: a deer can be butchered head up or head down and is based on personal preference*).

- Some hunters prefer to age a deer prior to butchering in an attempt to improve tenderness and overall table quality of the meat. However, temperature conditions must be ideal for this process. Ideally, aging can be accomplished with the hide intact for 2-3 days as long as the temperature remains <32-38 degrees Fahrenheit. Otherwise, the risk of bacteria build-up and spoilage increases. Table quality of wild game meat is more a matter of proper handling and of preparation than of aging.
- Begin skinning at the rear legs by making a slit in the skin where the large tendon meets the leg muscle (*Note: do not cut the tendon!*). Work the skin off by carefully pulling and gently cutting where needed to facilitate removal. Work by taking turns skinning both legs simultaneously toward the pelvic area and then down the sides and back of the deer in the same process. The front legs will require some maneuvering of the knife to get around arm pits and elbows and down the neck. A warm freshly-killed deer is much easier to skin than a cold one and, in warm weather especially, skinning aids in the cooling process.
- The head can be removed as skinning reaches the deer's jawbone (*Note: if the deer is to be mounted, skinning should be done by a competent taxidermist in order to prevent damage to the cape*).
- Once the skin is removed, and the temperature above 40 degrees Fahrenheit, the deer should be butchered immediately, or cut into sections and placed in a cooler or large refrigerator overnight to prevent spoilage. If below 40 degrees Fahrenheit the deer may hang overnight but steps should be taken to prevent wild animals or insects from getting to the carcass if outside. Covering the carcass with a plastic tarp or placing it inside an unheated shed or garage is usually adequate for that purpose. Some hunters use commercial game bags or cheesecloth to cover game to protect the meat from insects during transport or while hanging. Sprinkling black pepper on the carcass has been said to keep insects off the meat until ready to process.

- Once skinned, meat can be selectively cut following the same charts used for cutting beef, or simply cut from the skeleton in chunks and either cubed for stews or ground into burger or sausage.
- Due to ongoing concerns for Chronic Wasting Disease (CWD), it is always a good precaution to remove and discard lymph nodes and avoid brain and spinal tissue. Lymph nodes are located behind the front shoulder blades and in the hind legs (*Lymph nodes are grey to brown and oval in shape*). Hemal nodes are located in the neck near the trachea and inside the body cavity near the back bone (*Hemal nodes are pea shaped and maroon or black in color*). Hemal nodes can be found in fat tissue and are often discarded before they are ever seen (*Note: if nodes are cut with the knife while butchering, it is good idea to wash the knife before resuming the butchering process*). Since CWD is commonly found in brain and spinal tissue, removing meat from the skeleton without cutting bones decreases the chance of CWD transmission (*Note: to date, no deer has tested positive for CWD in North Carolina nor has CWD been found to be transmissible to humans*).
- Purchasing an inexpensive meat grinder is a good investment offering many options for the do-it-yourselfer. Some hunters prefer to mix varying amounts of domestic meats (*beef and or pork*) with venison burger or sausage as a way to add flavor or increase moisture content for cooking. Efforts attributed to keeping the carcass clean, cool and dry during transport and butchering go far toward providing nutritious high quality table fare.

Game Birds: Plucking vs. Skinning

Whether to skin or pluck game birds depends on the individual hunter's preference. Skinning a bird is much easier than dealing with having to remove feathers. For someone planning to grind or cube the meat, skinning is a good option. On the other hand, if the intention is to roast or fry the bird whole or simply separate into parts, leaving the skin on retains moisture.

Skinning game birds can be easily accomplished by making an incision starting at the breast bone and peeling the skin off the breast ending at the legs and wings. In this way, the breast, legs, and wings can be utilized separately or ground together.

Plucking, on the other hand, typically sets the stage for roasting or deep frying. Birds can be either dry plucked or scalded first then plucked. Scalding facilitates easier feather removal and less feathers floating in the air. Some hunters also prefer to singe the skin slightly after plucking to aid in removal of small pin feathers associated with dry plucked birds.

Lastly, some hunters field dress birds (*remove internal organs*) while in the field while others wait until after the hunt to do so.

Freezing/Storing

When it comes time to cook game, it is far easier and more appetizing if the meat has been properly cared for before freezing. All meat prepped for freezing should be cleaned and trimmed of fat and excess connective tissue. Fat left on game meat, especially venison, turns rancid in the freezer over time and can reduce the table quality of the meat.

All damaged meat near and around the wound channel should not be consumed. Recent research has shown that badly bruised and bloodshot meat may contain trace amounts of lead associated with the fragmentation of high speed rifle bullets. Therefore, in an effort to avoid ingesting lead, all damaged meat should be removed and discarded. This can be accomplished by cutting away all bruised and bloodshot meat at the wound channel and surrounding areas. Making well placed shots on game animals minimizes damage to edible meat.

It is also a good idea to freeze game meat in meal-sized portions. Doing so prevents the need to cook more than can be consumed in short periods. Wild game should be frozen using heavy duty freezer paper, aluminum foil, or freezer bags. When wrapping, try to remove as much air as possible to prevent freezer burn and mark packages so older ones can be consumed first. Some manufacturers offer reasonably priced vacuum sealing devices that keep frozen meat fresh for longer periods than simple wrapping or bagging.

Ideally, utilizing typical wrapping or bagging, wild game can remain frozen in a deep freezer (*0 degrees Fahrenheit*) for 8-10 months or longer without sacrificing table quality. All meat should be thawed in the refrigerator and not on the kitchen counter because slow thawing aids in tenderizing the meat. Once thawed, it is wise to cook the meat within 2-3 days or table quality may suffer. (*Note: be sure to check rules and regulations in the state you plan to hunt concerning bag limits, season limits, and consumptive use terms*).

Cooking/Canning/Smoking/Dehydrating:

Cooking

Cooking wild game properly will add to its palatability and enjoyment. Wild game, unlike domestic meats, is leaner and can become dry and tough if overcooked. For those preferring meat well done, game meat can become very dry if not basted or marinated prior to cooking. Crock pots are excellent for tenderizing very lean, low fat game meats as compared to simple grilling or pan frying. As a general rule, a slow low-temperature cook is better than a fast high-heat grilling when preparing game meats. The exception is in the case where medium rare is preferred over well done. Medium rare can be accomplished with high heat and a

fast cook but it is important that the internal temperature is at least 160-170 degrees Fahrenheit in order to prevent food-borne illnesses.

Some wild game meat should never be eaten rare or medium rare, especially black bear and feral swine, due to the chance of contracting the intestinal parasitic infection known as trichinosis. Black bear and feral swine meat should always be cooked well done containing no traces of pink remaining in the meat before consuming.

There is a great deal of wild game cook books as well as countless recipes available in various sporting magazines and hunting related websites. Eating wild game meat that you have harvested yourself is a rewarding accomplishment that contributes to both a healthy diet and organic lifestyle. Moreover it's delicious!

Canning

Proper preparation and handling is important for preventing food-borne illnesses when canning meats. Game meat intended for canning should be of good quality, cool (*not frozen*), and trimmed of any fat or connective tissue. Game meat, not unlike domestic beef and poultry, are low-acid foods and therefore should always be processed in a high temperature pressure canner and not in a water bath canner. The higher heat generated from pressure canning kills the food spoiling bacteria that can cause illness and or food poisoning.

Canning is an excellent way to preserve game meat for long-term storage (*up to 18 months*) and for providing quick ready-to-eat meals. The following NC State Extension website provides information about various preparation methods for cooking and canning meats.

<http://www.ces.ncsu.edu/depts/fcs/Preservation/>

Smoking and Dehydrating

Smoking and dehydrating (*drying*) of game meat is an age old process that is still widely used today for preserving meats. Game meat meant for smoking or dehydrating should be lean and free of all fat and connective tissue.

Smoking meat is accomplished with the aid of a wood fire utilizing hardwoods like hickory, oak, maple, apple, or chokecherry whereas dehydrating can be accomplished with the aid of a kitchen oven or commercial dehydrator. The number one concern is temperature both for the removal of moisture and proper cooking. Smoked meat should reach an internal temperature of at least 165 degrees Fahrenheit in order to kill any bacteria. Ideally, smoked or dehydrated meat should have a texture that is dry (*not moist*) and should bend but not break as break is an indicator of over drying. Meats meant for jerky are usually maintained for several days at a temperature of 38 degrees Fahrenheit while soaking in marinating brine

prior to smoking. The following NC State Extension website provides information about proper preparation, handling, drying and smoking meats.

<http://www.ces.ncsu.edu/depts/fcs/Preservation/>

Wild Game Recipes

One of many satisfying aspects of hunting is the reward of excellent table fare a hunter procured for themselves. Many people in North Carolina, both hunters and non-hunters alike, are interested in living a healthy lifestyle which may include consuming organically-grown food. Locally grown is becoming an increasingly popular way to enjoy fresh fruit and vegetables and backyard gardens are seeing a resurgence. One of the driving forces for the “going organic” movement is related to concerns about chemicals and pesticides associated with mass production of food.

Therefore, what could be more organic and healthy than hunting for meat rather than buying it in the grocery store? Wild game meat is much leaner and healthier than many types of domestic meats and contributes overall to a healthy diet. Meat from hunting does not go through the chemical-related processes of grocery-store domestic meats. Hunting and eating wild game provides a lean, free-range protein product similar to that of other organic foods. Moreover, for those who hunt, fresh meat procured through hunting embodies a do-it-yourself pride and satisfaction similar to that of growing your own vegetable garden.

The following NC State Extension website offers a variety of wild game recipes <http://www.ces.ncsu.edu/martin/wildrecipes/>