

Big Game Guide to Field Care & Home Processing

General Information

Properly field-dressing game is the most important part of a successful hunting trip. Deer and antelope make fine table fare if the animal is well cared for. The flavor of the meat depends on how quickly and carefully the meat is field dressed. Far too many animals are wasted or provide poor-quality eating because some fail to follow simple, common-sense rules of good meat handling.

Field Dressing Equipment

A few simple tools are necessary to properly field dress an animal. Tools include a sharp knife and sharpening equipment, a small saw for splitting the sternum and pelvis, a light rope or nylon cord for dragging, disposable vinyl or latex gloves, a cloth for cleanup, and a plastic bag for the liver and heart.

After the Kill

It is important to field dress the animal immediately after the kill. Remove heavy hunting coats and roll up shirts sleeves so they won't be bloodied in the process. A pair of disposable vinyl or latex gloves will reduce the chance of passing infectious diseases and makes hand cleaning easier. Some hunters advocate bleeding the animal by sticking it with a knife just above the breastbone, but most hunters believe that is unnecessary and should be avoided, especially if the head and shoulders are to be mounted.

Legal Requirements

The signed and properly punched permit must remain with the deer carcass. Follow tagging instructions on the permit. The head must remain unskinned and attached to the carcass until it has been checked through an official check station and a seal has been affixed. The carcass, except for the head, may be skinned prior to checking the deer. To make transporting the carcass out of a difficult area more convenient, the hind one-half of the animal may be separated from the front half, but the head must remain on the front half and evidence of sex must remain on the hind half. Any deer, antelope or elk left in the custody of one other than the hunter must be tagged with the information found on a "Game and Fish Custody Tag." Custody tags are available at all Game and Parks Commission offices, big game check stations and from conservation officers. The metal check-station seal must remain on the carcass or with boned meat while being transported to the processor or the hunter's dwelling.

Field Dressing

Removal of scent glands is not considered necessary, but is done with care by many hunters. Careless removal of the glands can taint the meat if the knife is not thoroughly cleaned afterward. Place the carcass on its back with the rump lower than the shoulders and spread the hind legs. Make a cut along the center-line of the belly from breastbone to the base of the tail. First cut the hide, then cut carefully through the belly muscle. Avoid cutting into the paunch and intestines by holding them away from the knife with your free hand while guiding the knife with the other. Unless the head is to be mounted, it is advisable to cut through the sternum and extend the cut up the neck to the chin to allow removal of as much of the windpipe as possible. The windpipe sours rapidly and is a leading cause of tainted meat. Cutting with the direction of the hair (from throat to tail) will greatly reduce the amount of hair spreading to the meat. With a small, sharp knife, cut around the anus and draw it into the body cavity so it comes free with the complete intestines. Or, simply break the pelvic bone and pull the innards downward past the spread legs, then go back and cut around the anus last to free it from the hide. A small saw makes cutting the sternum and pelvic bone much easier. Avoid cutting or breaking the bladder. Loosen and roll out the stomach and intestines. Save the liver. Splitting the pelvic bone helps hasten cooling. Next, cut around the edge of the diaphragm, which separates the chest and stomach cavities, and split the breastbone. Then, reach forward

to cut the windpipe and esophagus ahead of the lungs, which allows removal of the heart from the chest cavity. Save the heart. Drain excess blood from the body cavity by turning the body belly-down or hanging the animal head-up. A clean cloth can be used to clean hands, If you puncture the entrails with a bullet or your knife, wipe the body cavity clean or rinse it with water and wipe with a cloth. Part of the satisfaction of the hunt comes with making a clean kill and properly field dressing the animal. Veteran hunters may have their own variation in field dressing an animal, but the important points are to remove the internal organs immediately after the kill without contaminating the body cavity with dirt, hair or contents of the digestive tract and to drain all excess blood from the body cavity. Trim all parts damaged by a gunshot. If the weather is warm or the animal is to be left in the field for a day or more, it may be skinned (except for the head) and washed clean of dirt and hair. It should be placed in a shroud sack or wrapped with a porous cloth to cool (cheesecloth is ideal). Make sure the cloth is porous enough to allow air circulation but firmly woven enough to protect the carcass from insects and dirt. Adequate cooling may take six hours or more, depending on weather conditions.

The Trip Home

After the animal is checked and sealed, the head may be removed and the animal quartered for easy handling. Hunters should avoid transporting dead animals on the hood or top of vehicles. It is better to transport the animal out of sight or out of the sun in the trunk, inside the vehicle or in a covered truck box or trailer. This will help keep the animal cooler and cleaner. Warm meat spoils quickly. For early-season deer shot when temperatures are above 50 degrees, use bags of ice to cool the carcass.

Commercial Processor or Do It Yourself

Many hunters utilize the convenience of a commercial processor. They prefer the convenience and the ability to make specialties such as sausage, jerky and deer sticks. Others prefer to process their deer at home. Some get together with friends and process several deer at once. Some hunters use both methods by skinning and boning their deer and taking some of the meat to a processor to make jerky or sausage. Whichever method you choose the same basic methods should be followed. Keep the carcass clean, dry and cool. Bone out the meat from the deer. Do not cut through the spinal column or brain with meat processing equipment. If your deer is being tested for CWD, store the meat until test results are available. If your deer is found to have CWD, dispose of the meat at a licensed landfill.

Home Processing

Equipment - A sharp boning knife or fish-fillet knife with a 6-8 inch flexible blade makes butchering much easier. Keep sharpening tools handy. A dull hunting knife makes butchering a miserable job. At a minimum you will also need a cutting board and plastic bags or freezer wrap. Disposable latex or vinyl gloves are useful for keeping your hands clean. Cleaning - Knives should be cleaned frequently with hot soapy water. Work areas can be kept bacteria free by cleaning with a 50/50 solution of water and bleach followed by a clear-water rinse. Cooling and Aging the Meat - The carcass should be hung by the head in a cool, dry, shady place for a minimum of 24 hours. In hot weather, use ice to cool the carcass and butcher as soon as possible. Some hunters believe that aging the carcass at the proper temperature yields better-flavored, more tender meat. Successful aging requires the carcass to be clean and kept at a temperature of 34-36 degrees. This requires a walk in cooler or a refrigerator. Most hunters skip the aging process and butcher the deer after it has cooled with excellent results. Skinning - Hang the deer by the head or neck. Avoid cutting through the hide to the hair. Avoid cutting through the skin over the tarsal glands. Avoid contaminating meat, hands and knives with dirt and dried urine found on the lower legs of rutting bucks. Begin by cutting through the skin around the neck, close to the head. Cut outward with the knife so you do not cut through the hair. It is best to remove as much of the hide as possible by pulling. Use the knife only in tight spots. Some hunters use a weight, winch or vehicle to pull most of the hide from the carcass. Insert a ball or rock in a fold in the neck skin and attach to a rope (it is best not to use this technique if the deer has been shot in the neck). Lower legs should be cut off at the knee joints. Wash the carcass with cold water and allow it to dry. Remove any hair that remains. Boning - Remove the hind quarters, inner tenderloins, loins, front quarters and neck meat from the carcass while it is hanging (neck should be last).

Place them in an ice chest. Move inside to your cutting area. Remove excess fat, gristle, tendons and lymph glands from the meat. Separate meat into muscle groups. The best steaks come from the hindquarters, back straps and tenderloins. The rib meat - even the meat between the ribs can be used unless the deer has been allowed to hang and become excessively dry - or loins cooked on the grill are superb. The front quarters and neck are most often used for stew, ground meat and sausage. Some hunters prefer to add ground beef or pork to give it extra fat and moisture. You can have a butcher shop grind and mix your meat also. Fat begins to break down once the meat is frozen and will give the meat an "off" taste. It is usually best to remove most fat unless you cook the meat within a few months. Wrapping and Storage - To avoid freezer burn, it is best to double wrap the meat in plastic or freezer paper, taking care to squeeze out all air pockets. Label the package with type of cut and year. If you harvest more than one deer, you might add a mark that allows you to identify the specific deer.

CWD Concerns

There is no evidence that chronic wasting disease can be transmitted to humans or to animals other than deer and elk. As a precaution though it is a good idea to avoid contact with any wild animal that appears sick. It is recommended that you not eat any sick deer, including those that have CWD. Prions, which cause CWD, are concentrated in the brain, spinal cord, eyes, spleen, tonsils and lymph nodes of infected animals. It is recommended that you avoid sawing or cutting through any of these areas while processing your deer. You should bone your deer and keep your deer meat separate from the meat of other deer.

<http://www.ngpc.state.ne.us/hunting/guides/generalhunt2.asp>

<http://research.transportation.org/Documents/SummaryofResponsestoMarylandSurveyonAnimalCarcassDisposal.doc>