

## Hunting, Skinning, Deer Hides Most Useable, by Metcalf

### Deer Skinning for Meat Cutters and Tanners

By Billy Metcalf

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Billy Metcalf brain tans for a living in the back woods of British Columbia (his contact info is in our Tanners Directory). He's also a frequent participant in The Hide Out!, our ongoing online discussion forum ... and he has a cool mustache.



I've been brain-tanning deer hides for about fifteen years. I collect about 150 deer hides a year, mostly from meat cutters who cut wild game for hunters. Some I get directly from the hunters themselves. Most of the hides that I get are skinned well, but could be better, a few are excellent and a few are sliced up and worthless.

Unfortunately the man who showed me how to efficiently take a hide off a deer has retired now. He was great to watch, he used his whole body to do it, his hands, his elbows, his knees, even his feet. He told me that as a meat cutter who gets paid by the pound for cut and wrapped meat, his main concerns when skinning were to get it done fast and to leave as much meat on the animal as possible. And for me as a tanner his hides were great to work with because he pulled the hide off instead of cutting it off with a knife. Which means a clean hide with no knife marks or holes.

The two main points I want to make are:

Where to make the cuts in the hide in order to get the best usable shape when the hide is tanned

How to separate the hide from the meat without using a knife.

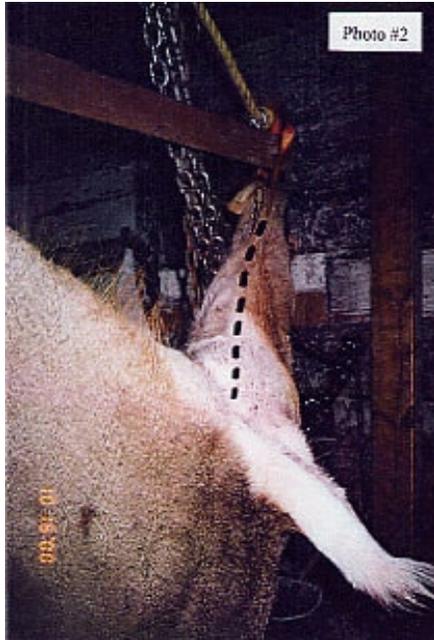


**Editor's Note: In this article, Billy shows you the skinning cuts he believes will result in a hide with the most useable shape. Many tanners and researchers report that this is also the more traditional cut for Native American items such as buffalo robes and war-shirts.**

#### Getting Started

This first picture shows a Mule deer hanging, ready to be skinned. Before hanging, the deer was field dressed and the lower part of the back legs were cut off below the main joint with a meat saw and the skin peeled back to expose the big leg tendon that we hang the deer from. Then after the deer was hung, the incision from the field dressing was extended up past the throat. The breast bone and wind pipe were removed to facilitate cooling the meat. The lower part of the front legs were removed at the knee joint as well.

Photo 1



**Photo 2**

2. Make an incision on the back legs. Start at the anus or just below, and cut right up the line where the hair changes color to the tendon that the deer is hung from. Then repeat on the other leg.

3. Put your knife away and peel the skin back from the inside of the back leg and all the way down the length of the belly and chest incision. Make sure that you have the skin separated from the meat. Be particularly careful where the arrow is pointing as the meat really wants to stay with the skin here. Now is the time to separate them.



**Photo 3**



**Photo 4**

4. This is how it looks with both sides peeled back and separated from the meat, all the way from the lower legs to the upper chest.

5. Now turn the deer around and peel the skin back from the outside of the back legs to just below the tail. Wrap your fingers tightly around the base of the tail and slide them out to the end, pushing the skin off in front of your fingers.



**Photo 5**

6. The tail will either turn inside out as it comes off the bone, or it will stay right side out as it did here. You don't need to split the tail skin first. Its easier to do later. Again keep an eye on the area where the arrow is to be sure the meat isn't sticking to the hide.



**Photo 6**



**Photo 7**

7. Now we're ready to make some serious progress. Two good pulls and your deer should look like photo #7. See how cleanly that hide is coming off. A couple more pulls and we're around the front shoulders.

8. Separate the hide from the meat along the edges of the incision going up the neck until your at least past the front legs a few inches. Work the hide loose from around the shoulders like it shows here.



**Photo 8**



**Photo 9**

9. Then pull the leg inside out until it comes off the end of the front leg. Some people put their foot in there like a stirrup and stand on it to peel the front leg off. Remember we haven't made any cuts on the front legs, they're still in tubes.



Photo 10

10. Now work the hide free up the neck to the base of the ears and cut it off. All of the meat is on the animal. Some people might think that the flank meat is no good but it makes good hamburger and sausage. If you're a meat cutter who cuts 200 deer in season, you could get an extra 200 lbs. of meat, or more, by skinning clean and leaving that meat on the animal.

## What I've Learned

### Observations

One of the most important things for me in recent years has been bucking (soaking the hide in alkali). I successfully tanned hundreds of deer hides without bucking but I never made garment quality buckskin from Moose or Elk before I started bucking the hides. It was just too labor intensive and I could easily do three deer with that time and effort. Having said that, I'm starting to realize that the real benefit to bucking big hides is in better brain penetration. Not so much or maybe not at all in easier graining. With these thick hides they may already be thick enough to grain just as easy before bucking. Like I said before, if the hide is too swollen it rolls in front of the blade. A dull blade doesn't do anything and a sharp one digs in. So in some cases it may be just as easy to grain before bucking, then membraning the hide afterwards will squeegee out some of the mucus or ground substance before rinsing. Also I'll try leaving the hide in the lye for a longer period of time.

Re-braining after smoking is a great thing to know about for doing these big hides. It's so much more relaxed and efficient than re-braining a white hide and having to work the whole thing out again. I can concentrate on the area that needs more work and just move the rest around to keep it soft. The areas that came soft the first time will come soft again with very little effort.

I have one more idea about doing big hides that I have yet to try. I think the lye solution could start out the same strength as when bucking a deer. Then after graining put the hide back into a stronger lye solution for a few more days. The lye would work it's way into the middle of the skin quicker after the hair and grain are removed.

If it's at all possible to predict the weather, try to soften big hides on a warm sunny day, with a light breeze. They are thick and will test your endurance. The time when they seem to be almost done really drags on compared to a deer skin, especially on a cool damp day.

## Key Tips for Big Hides:

Do a deer first and expect to work harder.

Buck the hide (soak in alkali) for better brain penetration.

Buck the hide longer and then rinse longer.

Use a longer wringing stick for leverage.

If it doesn't soften the first time, smoke it and then re-brain it.

This will make softening much easier.

Soften in warm, dry conditions, so it doesn't take forever.

Note that the interior of the hide can still be moist and need to be worked even after the exterior feels dry.

## Tips for smaller Folks

Being a full time tanner, I can't always get right on a hide when it's fresh, so I have to salt them and store them until some other time. Which means re-hydrating in water, and having to drag a sopping wet 150 lb. Moose hide to the fleshing beam. For a smaller person this could be much more than just inconvenient. Also the amount of upper body strength needed for wet scraping the grain could be prohibitive for a smaller person.

My ideas for dealing with big hides for small tanners are first, flesh them while they are fresh. That way you're not heaving that heavy wet hide around to the fleshing beam. Then string it up on a frame, dry it and dry scrape it. This way a smaller person is at no disadvantage when it comes to graining. Then you can re-hydrate the hide and buck it in order to get the benefit of the increased brain penetration. For wringing, a longer handle for twisting will give better leverage.

When it comes to softening there's not much that can be done to level the playing field for a smaller person. I rely on my weight to lean into those hides quite a bit. I definitely recommend frame softening for a small person. Cabling 25 sq. ft of thick Moose would wear me out in no time.

Adios. I hope that my experiences have helped some of you who want to tan a Moose or Elk. My goal here is to provide some encouragement and maybe some tips to help you work with these big beautiful hides. Good luck, and remember, it takes brains to make buckskin!



**Billy & His Completed Moose Hide**