

SO YOU GOT A DEER

*Scott Craven and
Dennis Buege*

Most venison is obtained out in the woods following the shot of a gun or the flight of an arrow. In addition, Wisconsin regulations on deer/car collisions now permit drivers to take possession of deer with which they have collided. Before doing so, however, drivers must contact a local Department of Natural Resources (DNR) representative. Whether you get your deer in the forest, open field or on the highway, there's a lot to be done before the first venison gets to the dinner table.

If you are a hunter, you need to get ready for handling your deer out in the field. Don't let the seasonal peak of enthusiasm just before opening day interfere with this preparation. Be sure to take along:

1. Ten to 15 feet of ¼-inch rope to drag the deer from the woods.
2. A sharp hunting knife (5–6 inch blade) to field dress the deer.



3. A plastic bag to hold the heart and liver if you are so inclined to eat these delicacies.
4. A square yard of cloth or toweling to clean out the body cavity of excess blood or intestinal contents and dry your cold, wet hands.

Be sure the deer is dead

Strive for a quick, clean kill. One theory holds that a deer chased hard or wounded tends to taste gamey and strong because of a build up of metabolic waste products in the muscle tissue.

Approach a downed deer with caution—it may not be dead. Many a hunter has been caught off guard when the deer he thought was dead jumped up and ran away. Never try to kill a deer with a hunting knife. A second shot behind the head will save you time and trouble. When you're sure the deer is dead, attach your deer tag as directed in the DNR regulations pamphlet.

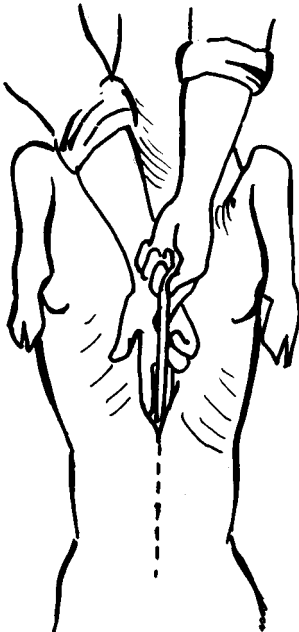
The old advice to bleed your deer immediately by severing the main blood vessels in the neck is no longer recommended. Modern firearms ordinarily take care of the bleeding without additional effort.

Field dressing

As soon as your deer is tagged prepare it for field dressing. Drag it to a spot where you will have plenty of working room and prop it up on its back. A rock or log might help. Place the carcass on a slope at a slight angle to straight downhill and work on the downhill side to make blood drainage easier. Then, open the deer on the underside from the breast bone to the tail or, vice versa as some hunters prefer.

Make the first opening through the skin and thin muscles of the upper abdomen just back of the breast bone. Lift the skin around the cut enough to insert two fingers of your free hand into the body cavity.

Then, keeping the cutting edge of the knife up and between your fingers, slit the skin down to and around the anal opening. The two-finger guide assures that the stomach and intestines are not cut. Meat contaminated by digestive tract contents may have off-flavors and be contaminated with bacteria which can cause food-borne illness if the meat is not properly handled or cooked. If your deer is a buck, cut around both sides of the genitals and discard them. When this is done, cut



the upper leg muscles between the hind legs (rounds) down to the soft bone of the pelvis. Then use a heavy, sharp knife to cut through this aitch bone and spread the two rounds. This exposes the canal which contains the large intestine.

Some hunters prefer not to cut the aitch bone until the deer is butchered or at least until they get back to camp where they can use a saw or hatchet. Instead, they cut around the anus and tie it off. This procedure allows you to draw the intestine back through the canal between the rounds, into the body cavity and out.

Cleaning the body cavity

Now that the abdominal cavity is opened and ready for cleaning, cut the diaphragm (membrane separating upper and lower body cavity) away from the ribs. Splitting the breastbone part of the way toward the neck makes it easier to cut the ligaments, blood vessels, esophagus (tube from the mouth to the stomach) and windpipe.

However, if you have to drag the deer very far, or over snowless ground, it's best not to cut the breastbone. With the smaller body opening, you will collect less dirt and debris as the deer is pulled along the ground.

Next, cut the liver and heart from their attachments and put them in the plastic bag. Pull the remaining entrails down and backward—and the deer is cleaned!

Be sure you don't rupture the bladder in pulling the entrails free of the body. Some hunters prefer to pinch off the bladder with one hand and cut it off and remove it before removing the other organs. The deer doesn't have a gall bladder so you can handle the liver (where a gall bladder is normally attached) without fear of rupture and contamination.

The kidneys usually adhere to the upper body wall and may be removed during field dressing or left until the carcass is cut up. Don't damage the two small strips of meat along either side of the spine in the body cavity. These are the tenderloins and are the choicest part of the deer. If fat covers the tenderloins, leave it in place to protect these muscles until cutting. To finish field dressing, wipe the inside of the body to get rid of excess blood or loose tissue. Do not wash or flush with water.

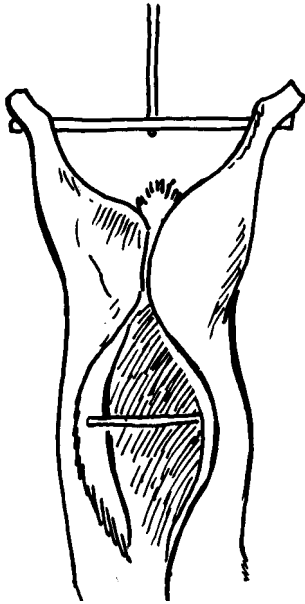
The deer is now ready to drag to camp or to your car for transportation home. If you want the head for a trophy, be careful as you drag the deer out. A long drag can wear the hair off down to the skin.

When you tie the deer on your car be aware of DNR regulations on concealment—leave the tag handy for the check station attendant. If it's one of those rare, warm November days, don't leave the carcass on a hot car any longer than necessary, as this may lead to spoilage of the meat. Don't tie the carcass on the hood. The engine heat will accelerate spoilage and the carcass will obscure your view of the road.

Hanging the deer

Once you get the deer to the camp or home it should be hung. This can be done head up or head down, whichever you prefer. To hang it head up use a rope around the neck or antlers. If necessary, hang at least four feet off the ground to prevent it being chewed on by dogs or wild animals.

The best device for hanging the carcass with the head down is a gambrel or strong stick, notched at both ends and in the center. Place the wood between the tendon and the hocks of each leg and spread the legs well apart. Tie a rope to the notched center of the stick to suspend the carcass. A short stick

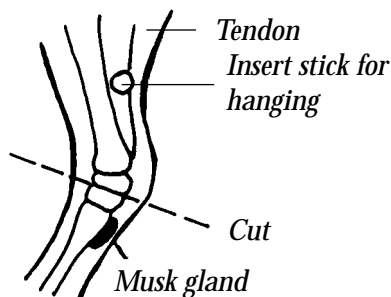


placed crosswise in the body cavity will keep it open and allow air circulation to dry the cavity and retard spoilage.

A deer in this condition is "hog dressed." If you like aged venison, leave the skin on and store the animal up to a week to 10 days at temperatures just above freezing. The hide prevents excessive moisture loss during this period. If temperatures are above 40°F, the aging time should be reduced. Aging improves the tenderness of the venison, but may cause greater trimming losses due to dehydration of exposed surfaces.

Skinning

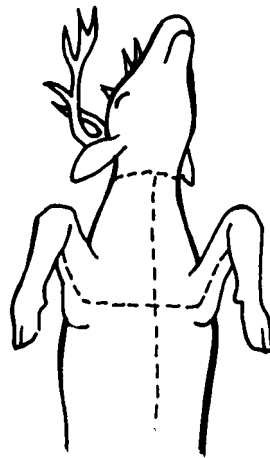
Remove the feet by cutting around the leg below the knee. Once the tendon of the front leg is cut, the leg can be snapped off by twisting or bending it against the natural curve in the leg. Use a meat saw to cut the leg quickly.



In cutting around the hind legs be sure to cut through the flat joint beyond the hock so the opening between the tendon and the hock itself will be left intact. If you cut the main tendon there is virtually no way to hang the deer head down for skinning.

Be careful not to touch the musk gland which is on the outside of each hind leg below the hock. If you cut into this gland you are likely to get the pungent, disagreeable odor of musk on the meat.

After removing the lower legs, cut through the skin down the inside of each leg. Cut along the underside of the brisket (chest), and continue up the underside of the neck to the base of the skull. (See special instructions for preparing your trophy head.)



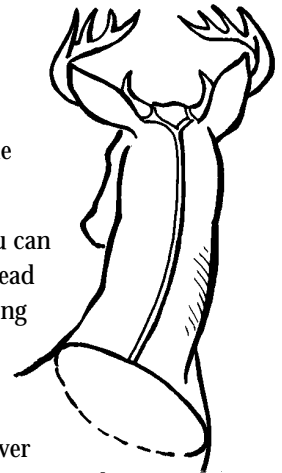
Next work the skin away from each of the hind legs. A sharp knife and strong fingers are your best tools for this job. When the hind legs are free you can pull the tailbones out of the tail.

Skinning the trophy head

If you want the head mounted for your trophy room, special care is needed. Start skinning with a cut along the back of the neck (not the underside) from the shoulders to between the ears.

Remove the hide by working forward until the skull is exposed. Then cut the

flesh where the skull joins the neck and twist the head off or saw through the spine.



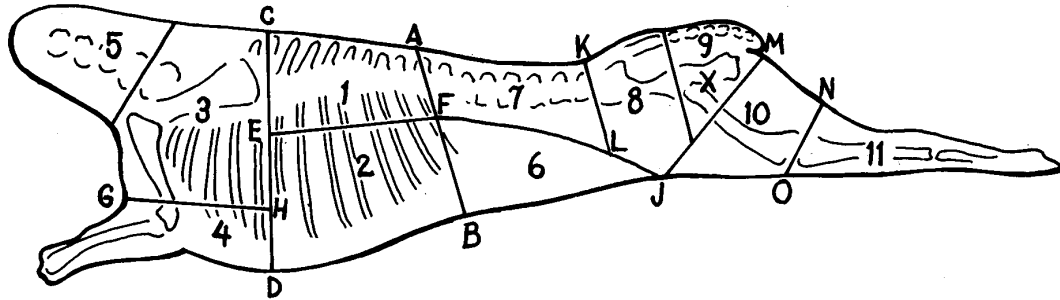
Alternately, you can skin the deer head down by working the hide down the neck (no cuts) until the entire hide is over the head. Then remove the head, salt all flesh or skin surfaces, and take the entire hide to a taxidermist where he or she can remove what is needed and save the rest of the hide.

At this point take the tongue out. It's edible, if you wish to try it. Now give the hide and exposed part of the skull generous salting and take it to a taxidermist immediately.

Skinning the deer

Remove the hide from the body proper by strong downward pulling on those portions freed from the hind legs and tail region. To do this best it takes two people. Your hands, which won't slash the hide, are far better tools than a knife. The heel of the skinning knife and your fist will help in places where





the body is difficult to separate from the hide.

If the 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 there is less likelihood 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 will trade for a pair of gloves or other goods. If you want to have it tanned, you can have several pairs of gloves made from a deer hide or you can save them until you have enough for a larger garment. A buckskin tannery is W.B. Place and Co. in Hartford, Wisconsin (1-800-TAN-HIDE).

Looking out for hair

One of the most annoying aspects of poorly skinned venison is to find a roast or stew garnished with coarse deer hair.

You can avoid this unpleasant experience by taking plenty of time when cutting through the hide. It helps, too, if the cuts are made by inserting the knife under the skin and cutting through the skin from the inside. When you cut through the skin from the outside, you cut a lot of hairs, and these tend to stick to the clean carcass. Use a stiff brush to remove any hair on the meat. You don't need any water.

Cutting the carcass

There are hundreds of local independent meat processors who will cut, wrap and freeze deer for \$50-\$70. However, you gain personal satisfaction and avoid the bulk of this expense by doing it yourself.

Cutting up your own deer often results in "hacking" it into cuts that can be recognized only by the owner. This task need not be so difficult, though, if you follow a few simple directions.

Equip yourself with a good *sharp* knife (keep a whetstone handy) and a saw. A small meat saw is best, but a carpenter's saw will do in an emergency.

There are two approaches to cutting up the deer carcass. In the first method, split the carcass through the center of the backbone so as to have two "sides." Then with the skin side down and looking at the cavity, divide each side into quarters by cutting from A to B (as shown in diagram). Leave one rib on each hindquarter.

1. Cut through the forequarter between the fifth and sixth ribs (from C to D) and remove the rack (or rib) (1) and a portion of the breast (2).
2. Separate the rack from the breast by cutting about 3 inches below the inner edge of the backbone (E to F) and parallel to the line of the back. Use the rack for chops or roasts. Bone and grind the breast. If

desired, the rib section of the breast (2) can be cut into chunks and used as spareribs.

3. Separate the chuck (3) from the shank (4). Make your cut (G to H) parallel to the top of the chuck and about an inch above the elbow joint. Bone and grind the shank and breast. Use the chuck for pot roasts. Cut one roast parallel to the back (next to line G to H). Starting at the top of the back, cut two or more roasts parallel to the line from C to H.
4. Remove and bone the neck (5).
5. Remove the flank (6), cutting from F to J. Bone and grind the flank.
6. Separate the loin (7) from the haunch or leg. Make your cut (K to L) just in front of the hip bone and parallel to line A to F. Slice the loin into loin chops.
7. Separate the rump (9) and sirloin (8) from the leg. Make your cut just below the aitch bone (x) (M to J). The rump is a good roast. The sirloin may be used for roasts or for sirloin steaks.
8. Venison round steaks are usually cut from the round (10), separated from the shank (11) along the line N to O just above the stifle joint between the two long leg bones. Bone and grind the shank.

The second method allows you to cut the steaks and chops yourself while leaving the difficult boning of the front half of the carcass to the butcher.

1. With the skinned carcass hanging head up, make the cut K-L-J to the spine on each side of the carcass. Saw through the spine and remove the two rounds.
2. Spread the two rounds and saw lengthwise through the spine separating the two rounds. Each can now be cut into roasts and steaks as in method 1, steps 7 and 8. If you wish to save freezer space, separate each of the large muscle bundles (9, 10) in the round, remove them, and slice them against the grain for boneless steaks. Remember, the colder (and thus stiffer) the meat, the easier it is to slice. Grind scraps and the tough lower leg muscles (11) for deer burgers.
3. Using your fingers and a sharp boning knife, separate the loins from the spine from the K-L-J cut all the way up into the shoulder. Work carefully and close to the bone. Each loin will come out as a long strip of meat which can be sliced into boneless chops.
4. You now have all the best cuts ready for the freezer. The remaining front half of the deer can be taken to a processor for boning, grinding and/or sausage preparation.

Some hunters and processors like to prepare totally boneless cuts. This can be most easily done by hanging the deer by its hind legs and carefully separating the meat from the bone. With the deer in the hanging position, the pull of gravity will help remove the meat.

If you are wondering what to do with the ground portions, how about deer burgers? You can improve the flavor somewhat and make them more juicy by adding 25–50% ground fatty pork to the ground venison. As an alternative, part or all of the venison can be made into sausage. The boned meat can be taken to a local processor who will add beef or pork and can manu-

facture a wide variety of venison sausages such as bratwurst, summer sausage, wieners, Italian sausage and others. The charge for this service ranges from \$1.50 to \$2.50 per pound finished weight, which usually includes the cost of added pork or beef. If you wish, some meat departments offer pre-packaged spice blends and casings and you can make your own sausage. Remember, however, it is against the law to sell venison. A permit is required from the DNR to allow donated venison to be served at community “game feeds.”

Preserving venison

Venison may be preserved by curing, drying, smoking (dried venison), corning and canning. Today, probably the most widely used method of preservation is freezing.

To freeze venison successfully, wrap it tightly in a good quality freezing paper, eliminating as much air as possible during wrapping. Since fat tends to change in flavor during storage, you probably will want to trim off as much as possible. Properly wrapped venison cuts can be stored nine months at 0°F or lower, and retain acceptable flavor. Ground venison stored in the freezer longer than four months may develop off flavors. DNR regulations require that all venison be used up before the following July 1.

Venison is cooked in a way similar to lean beef. If the deer is suspected of being old (worn down teeth), the meat should be ground or cooked by moist heat (stewing, braising) to ensure tenderness. Top quality cuts from young deer may be satisfactorily cooked by broiling or oven roasting.

Much of venison's gamey flavor comes from the natural fat. This flavor may be reduced by trimming off excess fat. Other fats, such as bacon, lard or suet may be added to the lean venison to help prevent it from drying out during cooking.

For recipes and tips on cooking venison, see *Wisconsin's Wild Game: Enjoying the Harvest* (B3573), available at your county Extension office or from Extension Publications, Room 170, 630 W. Mifflin St., Madison, WI 53703. Call toll-free (1-877-WIS-PUBS) for more information.





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