

# *Field Dressing Big Game*



TEXAS AGRICULTURAL EXTENSION SERVICE  
THE TEXAS A&M UNIVERSITY SYSTEM  
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# FIELD DRESSING BIG GAME

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Many successful big game hunters have learned the hard way that venison quality is strongly influenced by handling of the carcass from the time of the kill until it is placed in the freezer.

This publication explains two methods of field dressing and skinning big game. Any method resulting in a clean, well-bled carcass is satisfactory. Unpleasant experiences with venison usually result from lack of care before the meat reaches the

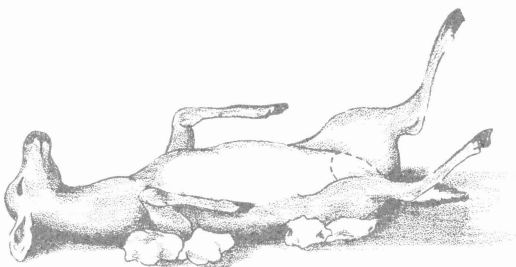


Figure 1. Removing external sex organs (female whitetail deer)

kitchen. See B-987, *Wild Game Care and Cooking* (Texas Agricultural Extension Service), for many delicious ways to prepare venison.

## Procedure

After shooting your game, approach the animal carefully from the rear, making sure it is dead. Tag the animal immediately to comply with game laws.

Before making any cuts, be sure your knife is sharp. A sharpening stone should be part of your field equipment, and your knife should have a large,

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comfortable handle that can be grasped firmly, even with wet hands.

If you plan to have the head mounted, ask your taxidermist which measurements will be helpful.

Prop the animal on its back, using rocks if available, and remove the external sex organs (penis and scrotum or mammary gland). See *figure 1*. Cut down



Figure 2. Cutting from pelvic bone to breastbone (male whitetail deer)

to the pelvic bone. Then turn your knife blade up, use your other hand to hold the belly away from the entrails, and cut up to the breastbone. If you plan to have the head mounted, do not cut the skin any further forward than the middle of the breastbone. See *figure 2*.

Hold the entrails to the side and cut loose the thin layer of muscle (diaphragm) which holds the entrails to the ribs. Reach into the rib cage and cut loose the windpipe and esophagus as far forward as possible. Grasp the windpipe and esophagus with both hands and pull downward. You should be able to pull the entrails free to the pelvic region. See *figure 3*. Cut the skin and muscles around the anus, being

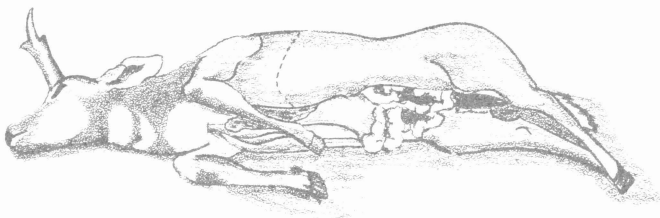


Figure 3. Pulling entrails free to pelvic region (male pronghorn antelope)

careful not to puncture the bladder, and pull the intestine forward. The animal is now field dressed and should be hung to cool.

## Quick Method

An alternative cut may be used to speed up the process, if you are not going to have the head mounted and if the animal is not too big or too old.

Continue the belly cut through the breastbone and into the neck before cutting the windpipe and

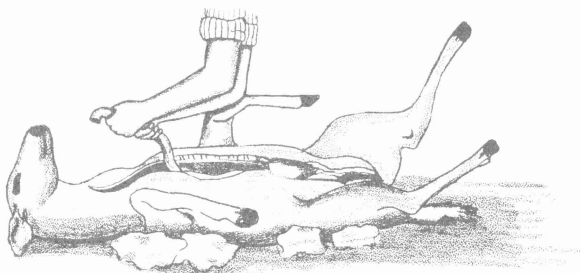


Figure 4. Removing entrails the quick way (female whitetail deer)

esophagus. It is easier to cut through the gristle between the breastbone and ribs if the cut is made slightly to one side of the breastbone rather than down the middle.

Cut the esophagus and windpipe in the neck. Grasp them with one hand and pull the lungs and heart free to the diaphragm. See figure 4. Cut the diaphragm (see dotted lines in figures 3 and 7) free from the rib cage while holding the lungs and heart to one side. Continue pulling the esophagus and windpipe, and lift out the remainder of the viscera to the pelvic region.

Locate the thin seam which joins the bones at the middle of the pelvis. Using a sheath knife, press

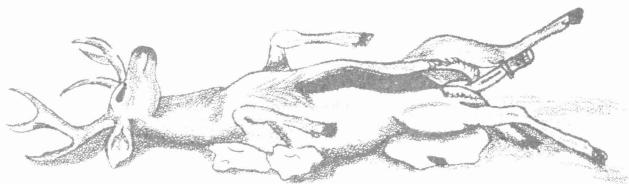


Figure 5. Splitting the pelvic seam (male whitetail deer)

down at the seam and cut the bones apart. See *figure 5*. If you are using a thin blade pocket knife, locate the seam by feeling for a ridge inside the body cavity in the middle of the pelvis. If the animal is not too old, the ridge is very pronounced, so you can cut through the pelvis by pulling your knife through the center of the ridge. If the animal is old, the seam will have grown together and be difficult to split.

Place the animal in a spread-eagle position, and stand with one foot on each of its hind legs. Pull up on its tail to break open the pelvis. Pull the intestines and reproductive tract through this opening and cut the viscera free around the anus. This method works well for animals the size of deer.

Hang the animal by its head or antlers from a nearby tree long enough to allow the remaining blood to drain from the body cavity. Place a stick in the rib cage to aid in cooling the carcass, as *shown in figures 6 and 7*. If a tree is not available, lift the front legs to allow the blood to drain between the hind legs.

## **Skinning**

Since the skin comes off easily while the carcass is still warm, it is best to skin the animal soon after death.

If you do not have a clean cloth bag or covering to wrap the carcass after skinning, transport the carcass with the skin attached. Solid material is preferable to cheesecloth because flies can deposit eggs through cheesecloth.

If you do not want to skin and process the animal yourself, take it to a commercial processing plant after field dressing it.

Regardless of the method you choose, always protect the meat from dirt and flies, and allow time for the meat to cool and drain.

If the head is to be mounted, hang the animal by its hind legs and skin from the hind legs downward. Cut down the inside of each leg to the opening cut, around the hind legs at the hock and around the front legs at the knee joint. Grasp the skin and pull downward, using your knife to work the skin off the legs and loosen the skin from the meat. Pull the skin to the head, and cut the head from the neck. Leave the skin

free of cuts forward of the front legs so the taxidermist will have enough hide to make a good mount. Salt or freeze the head and skin until you deliver it to the taxidermist.

If the head is not to be mounted, hang the carcass by the head and skin it from the neck downward. The hide is easier to remove in this position. Cut the skin loose from around the neck, around the legs and down the inside of each leg. See *figure 6*. Be sure the rope and tree

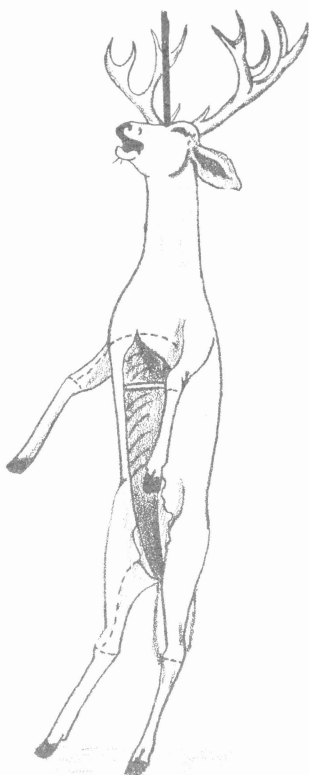
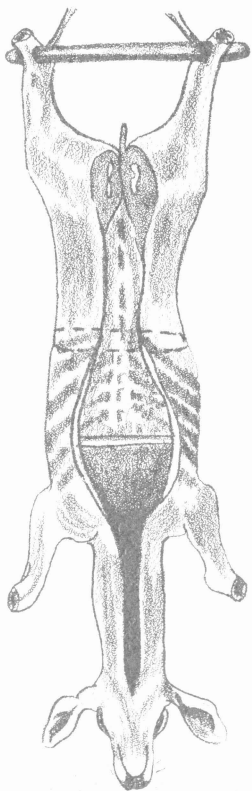


Figure 6. Skinning cuts outlined (male mule deer)

Figure 7. Hanging carcass to cool and age (female mule deer)

limb are strong enough to hold the carcass. Grasp the skin back of the head and pull down hard with both hands.

Hang the skinned carcass by the hind legs in the shade to cool and age. See *figure 7*. If the carcass is hung by the antlers or head, the blood still in the veins will collect in the hams. Cover for protection. Then cut the carcass as you wish, or have it commercially processed.

## **Tips on Quality**

Flavor, tenderness and juiciness probably are the most important aspects of venison quality. The hunter controls factors such as the sex of the animal, hunting practices and handling techniques after slaughter which may enhance or reduce this quality.

Individual preference plays the major role in deciding which sex to hunt. For example, if you prefer a highly intensified (gamey) flavor, hunt a male animal; if you prefer a less intensified flavor of venison, a female animal probably will be your best choice. The sex also may affect tenderness and juiciness, but not as much as the intensity of flavor. The meat of female animals usually is juicier and more tender than males. Age of the animal, which is a difficult factor for the hunter to control, probably has a greater influence on tenderness and juiciness than does the sex.

Proper hunting practices are very important in determining the final venison quality. First, try to select an animal which has been resting or is quietly grazing instead of one excited by a disturbance or stressed from heavy exercise. Second, place the shot so that it insures a clean kill (instant death). Normally, a shot through the neck or lungs will result in a clean kill and less tissue damage (wastage). An animal shot in the gut or hind quarter, for example, will die slowly, causing muscle stress and consequently a decrease in meat tenderness. Thus, an undisturbed, unstressed animal which suffers little in death will yield the highest quality meat.

Handling techniques after slaughter also will influence the final meat quality. Field dress the animal as soon as possible after death and hang so the carcass will be thoroughly bled. Delayed field dressing will cause a decrease in meat quality. Hanging the carcass also will increase tenderness by allowing some muscles to stretch. Skinning the animal soon after field dressing seems to enhance

the quality slightly. However, if you plan to transport or age the animal before processing, leave the skin intact to prevent drying of the meat's outer surface.

Age the carcass in cold storage just above freezing for about a week to increase the tenderness and possibly the flavor of the venison.

To insure high meat quality, reduce bacterial spoilage by keeping the carcass as clean as possible. Rinse the outer meat surface and inner body cavity with clean water if any debris, hair or intestinal material is present. Chill the carcass to 35 degrees F. by hanging it outside (weather conditions permitting) or by putting it in cold storage. Once the carcass is packaged, keep it frozen in a moisture- and vapor-proof packaging material until ready for use.

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