

Handling and Care of Game and Fish

INTRODUCTION

Many birds, mammals, fish, reptiles and amphibians are edible. In some areas our most familiar game species are a common source of meat brought to the table. However, other species not normally thought to be game — such as armadillo, groundhog, beaver, muskrat and rattlesnake — are also tasty when prepared properly. Most hunters take pride in preparing their harvest for the table. Wild meat is a delicacy that can seldom be purchased in a store. In addition, the skins or pelts of animals are often sold or used in the making of rugs, wallets, belts and other articles. (Make sure whenever you hunt that you put the carcass to good use!) This activity is designed to teach you how to handle wild game from the field to the home.

WHITE-TAILED DEER

The care of game actually begins before you leave on the hunt. You should pack with the idea that you will be successful. That way, you will be sure to have the necessary equipment to care for the game you bag.

The items you will find useful include:

- Rope for dragging the deer back to camp and for hanging the animal for skinning.
- Whetstone for knife sharpening.
- Cord to tie off the deer's anus or for making loops to hang small game.
- Small block-and-tackle for hoisting the deer.
- Saw or small ax to cut small limbs to prop open the deer's body cavity.
- Paper towels or cloths to wipe the body cavity.
- Small plastic bag for the heart and liver.

When you have your deer on the ground, the quicker you take care of it the better the meat will be. Start by picking up a piece of skin on the belly just below the union of the ribs. Cut across the skin with a

saw-like motion and make a small opening. Turn your knife so that the sharp part of the blade is pointed upward, away from the interior of the deer's body. Make a cut from the junction of the ribs down to the genitals. Cut around the genitals on both sides, being careful not to pierce the bladder. Cut around the anus (use a piece of string to tie it shut and push it back into the body cavity). Next, cut through the center of the rib cage, clean out the thoracic cavity, and prop it apart with a stick.

Roll out, pull out or otherwise remove the internal organs. Be careful not to rupture the urinary bladder or the gall bladder: the contents of either can taint the meat. Reach through the diaphragm into the cavity as far as you can, cut the windpipe and esophagus and remove them. Separate the heart and liver from the remainder of the internal organs and retain them for cooking. Now you are ready to transport the deer to your camp or home. During transport, leave on the skin to protect the meat. During the warmer parts of the year, it may be necessary to transport the carcass immediately to a cooler.

You may wish to have your deer skinned and butchered by a professional, but you can do it yourself. If you plan to have the head mounted, insert a stick in the hocks of the hind legs and raise the rear end off the ground. Make a cut completely around the body

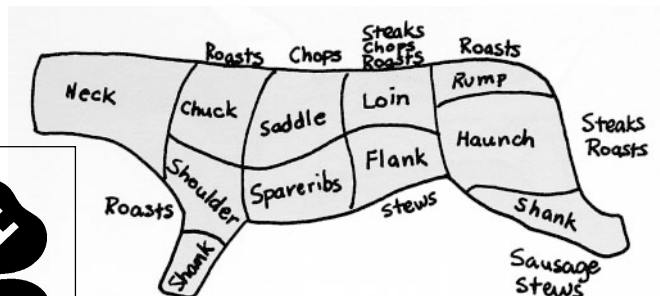
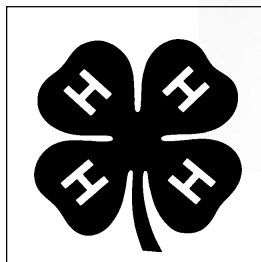


Figure 1. Butchering Cuts in a Side of Vension

behind the front legs. Then, cut along the back of the neck up to the head. Next, cut around the legs just above the feet and peel the hide off. Do not try to pull it over the head itself. Now, cut the head off at the last neck joint and sprinkle the fleshside liberally with salt. Fold the salted side in and take the hide as quickly as possible to a taxidermist.

If you aren't going to have the head mounted, hang the deer by its head or antlers. Cut the hide from the throat to your initial cut (when field dressing) and down both front and hind legs. Remove the feet with a saw or an ax. Now proceed to peel the skin from the animal. Remove the skinned carcass from the head by cutting off the neck at the last joint. Cut through the brisket and pelvic girdle with a saw or an ax.

Remove any remaining internal organs. Wipe the body cavity with cloth or paper towels. If the carcass is gut shot, wash the internal cavity thoroughly with soda water. Prop open the body cavity and cover the carcass with cheesecloth or place it in a meat bag. The meat may be frozen as soon as possible, or aged three to 10 days at a temperature between 34 and 38 F. If temperatures range much higher, the meat will spoil.

When the meat is chilled, cut and freeze it. Separate the carcass in halves by sawing down the back-bone from the anus to the base of the neck. Proceed to butcher each half using the diagram in Figure 1. If bones are removed, less freezer space is needed.

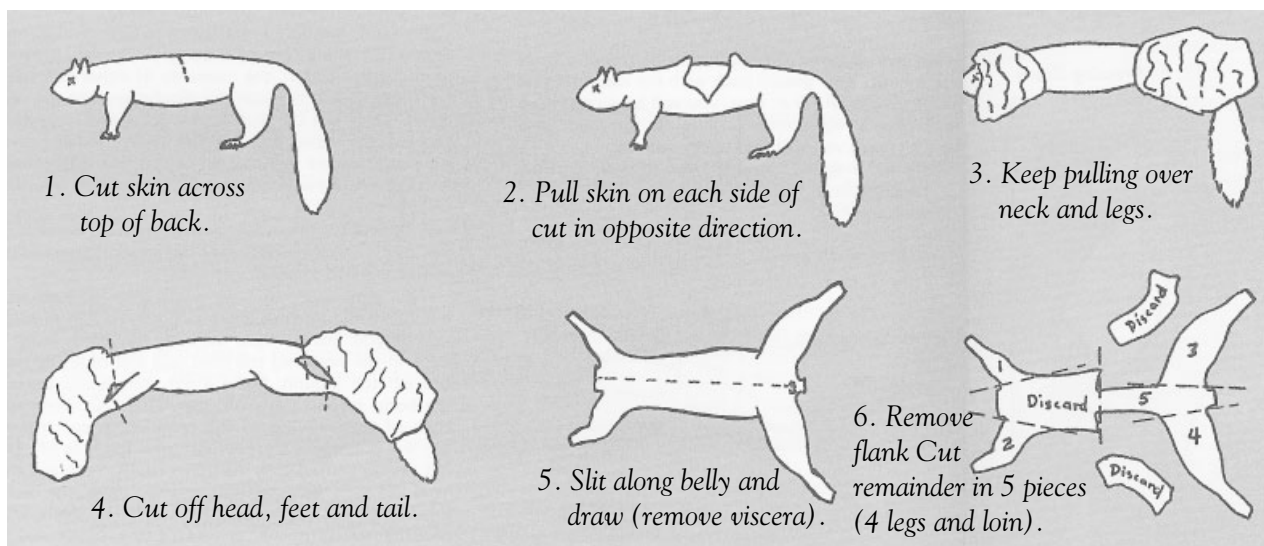
COTTONTAIL RABBIT AND SQUIRREL

Rabbit and squirrel may be dressed in the field or upon arrival at home. If they are to be dressed in the field, remove the internal organs as soon as possible. Make an incision from the junction of the ribs on the lower side to the anus. (Be careful not to cut into the intestines.) You may then reach in and pull the entrails out or grab the animal with one hand on the head or ears and the other on the rump with the cut pointed away from you. Make a quick, sharp swing with both arms: this will sling the entrails out of the carcass.

You can then remove the other organs: heart, liver, lungs. Cut off the head and wipe the body cavity with cloth or paper towels. They may also be skinned in the field. Hint: Place rabbits and squirrels individually in plastic bags before putting them in your hunting coat. This helps prevent blood stains.

Skin the game by cutting across the middle of the back for 2 or 3 inches. Put your fingers beneath the skin on each side and pull in opposite directions (see Figure 2). Squirrels may be skinned by cutting across the base of the tail and out the back of the hind legs. Place your foot on the tail and remove the skin by pulling from the hind legs. This is a clean way of skinning squirrels. If hair gets on the meat, wipe it with a rag dampened with water and vinegar. If you decide to dress the animals at home, skin them first. This keeps from getting hair on the meat.

Figure 2. Dressing Small Mammals (Squirrel, Rabbit)



As a rule, small game does not need aging. Do not leave it for long periods of time in the refrigerator or cooler. If you don't plan to cook it relatively soon, wrap and freeze it.

BEAVER

The value of beaver pelts varies from year to year, usually ranging from \$5 to \$25 for Southern beavers and higher for Northern beavers. The way the pelts are prepared affects the price significantly. If you wish to prepare a pelt, there are taxidermy manuals available that will teach you how to stretch and dry the pelt.

Follow the directions in Figure 3 in skinning the beaver. Once it is skinned, the internal organs can be removed.

Beaver meat, if properly prepared, is one of the most delicious of all wild animal dishes. The beaver carcass should be cut into pieces; the most choice parts are the loin and the legs. These pieces should be carefully washed in cold water, removing as much of the fat as possible. Tough pieces may be soaked in a suitable marinade, although this is not necessary if cooked properly. Beaver can be prepared in a variety of ways. It can be prepared about any way beef or venison is prepared. As a general rule of thumb, treat it like a moderately tough cut of beef.

BIRDS

Upland Game Birds, Wild Turkey, Woodcock, Snipe and Marsh Hen

Cut off head, wings and feet (keep wings of larger birds). Make a cut around the anus. Remove all internal organs and wipe the inside with paper towels or cloth. Most people prefer their game birds with the skin on. Birds are often dry plucked when they are still warm; the task is much harder once the birds have cooled. If the birds have cooled, you can scald them just as you would a chicken. Dip them rapidly into water 150 to 155 F. Hang them to drain and then pluck them. Down can be removed by singeing. If you like, you may skin rather than pluck the birds. However, removal of the skin allows the bird to dry out in cooking unless you are careful.

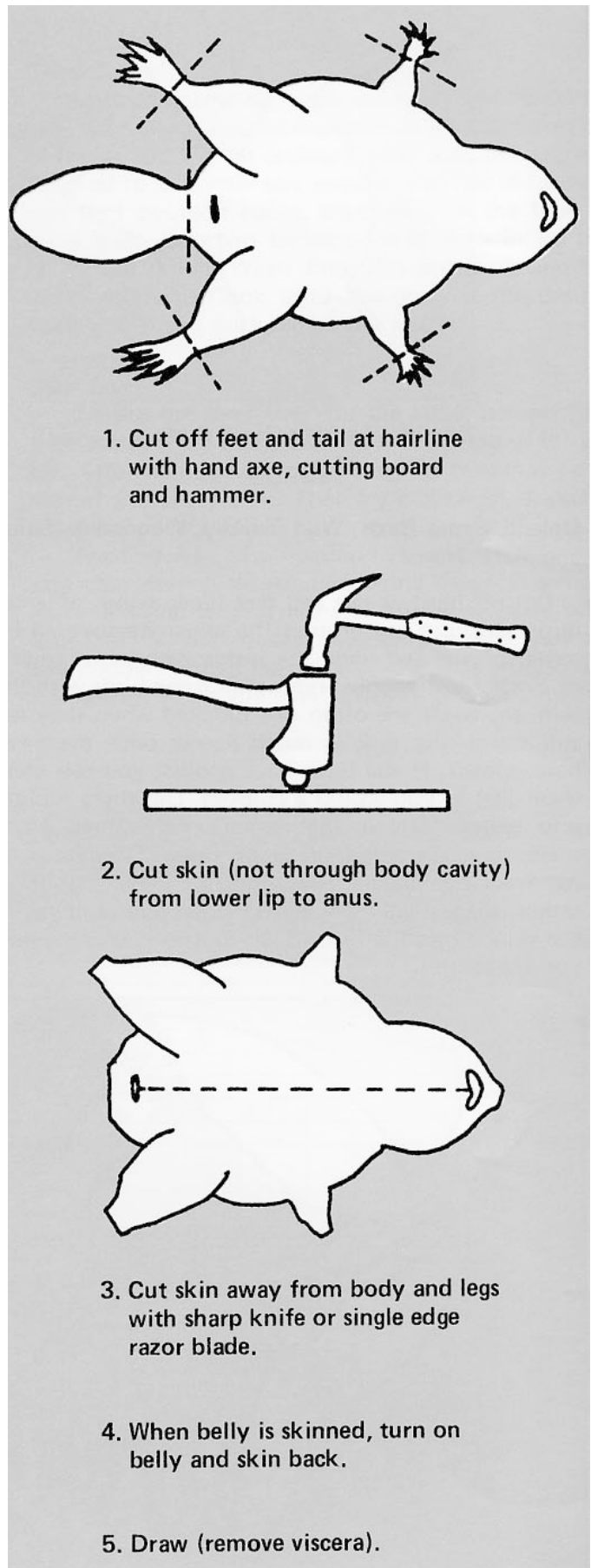


Figure 3. Dressing Medium-sized Mammals (Beaver, Groundhog)

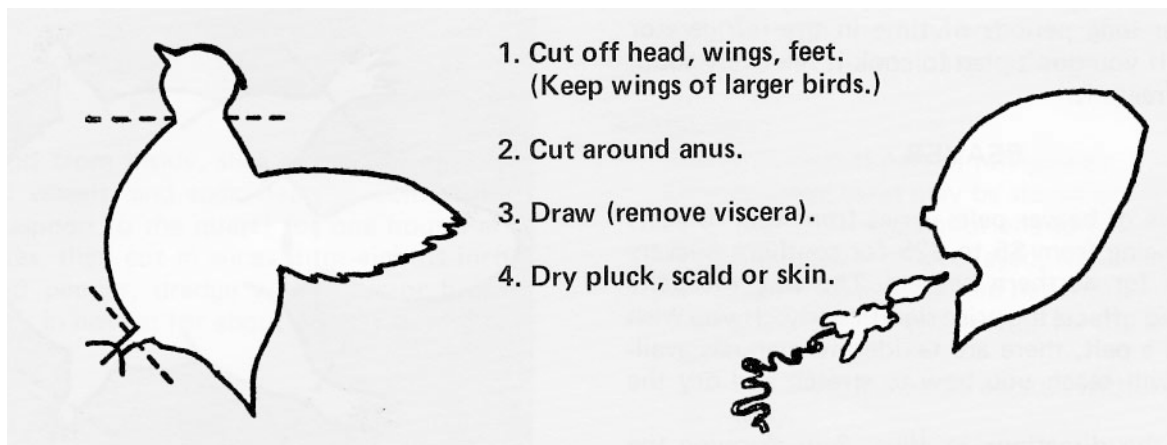


Figure 4. Dressing Game Birds

Doves

Doves may be dressed as described above. A simpler method follows:

1. Snip off the wings close to the body with large scissors or tin snips.
2. Place thumb between the anus and the large breastbone. Tear the breast away from the back with one motion, twisting it away from the rest of the body. You now have only the breast covered with feathers.
3. Skin the breast with the feathers by simply tearing the skin away with the fingers. You may want to pluck the breast instead of skinning it.

With this method, the breast is the only thing that is saved. Doves have very little meat on the legs and the rest of the body.

Waterfowl

Waterfowl are drawn (viscera removed) the same as upland birds. Avoid skinning ducks. When warm they may be dry plucked by taking a small amount of feathers and pulling against the grain. When cool, use hot water as described earlier. Down may be removed by singeing, or using paraffin. If you use the paraffin method, melt about three cakes in six quarts of water. Boil the water until the paraffin melts; then remove it from the heat. The paraffin will float on top of the water. Immerse the birds one at a time so they are coated with paraffin; then set them aside to cool. When the paraffin has hardened, peel it off or scrape with a small knife. The down is removed with the paraffin.

After cleaning the birds, wrap them in moisture- and vapor-proof material. Wrapping or otherwise preparing any wild meat for the freezer should be given more attention than domestic meat. Wild meat is more

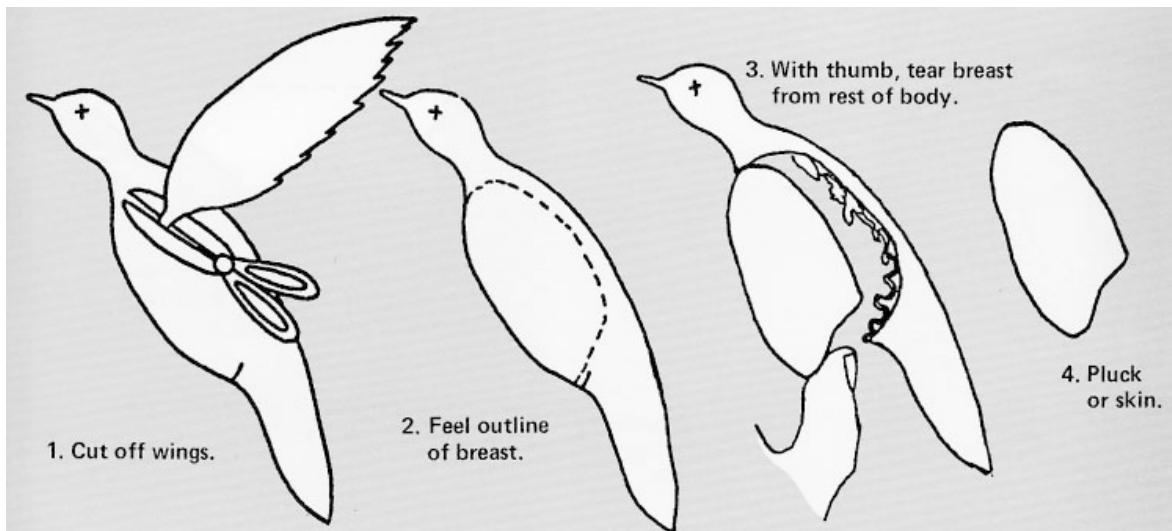


Figure 5. Dressing Doves

subject to freezer burn if not properly wrapped. Freezing the birds in water in paraffinized containers (such as milk cartons) or plastic containers may prevent freezer burn better than paper, plastic or aluminum wraps. Freeze immediately at 0 F. Properly frozen birds will retain good quality in the freezer for nine to 10 months. Thaw out the birds by placing the package in the refrigerator for 12 to 18 hours.

Success in freezing birds depends to no small extent on their care after they are killed. It is important to remove the body heat as soon as possible by allowing space between them rather than by piling them in the car trunk. Deterioration is rapid when birds are stacked. Often it is best to have birds frozen at a locker plant near the hunting grounds if the trip home is long. Be sure birds are drawn before freezing.

inch deep along the edge and drawing it around the entire circumference of the shell. To remove the "cloverleaf" section of the shell on the snapper's underside, slip a jackknife under its edge. Don't penetrate too deeply because you want to avoid cutting the intestines. Then slip a fillet knife under the cloverleaf and separate it from the underlying portion. Discard the cloverleaf.

The next step is removing the skin that surrounds the legs, tail and neck. Using the fillet knife, cut and pull the skin from the meat at the same time. The turtle's insides (heart, liver, intestines) may be left intact in the shell. To separate edible meat, run the jackknife or fillet knife under each front leg and shoulder and under the neck. Then simply lift the meat out of the shell. Trim away all the yellow fat you find on the neck and legs, because it is bitter-

AMPHIBIANS AND REPTILES

Dressing Snapping Turtle

Turtle meat was popular with the American Indians, believing that it protected them and made them difficult to kill in battle. It was usually simmered in soups or stews.

The snapper should be alive (at least fresh) when you begin to dress it. To safely hold the turtle, have it bite a hook with a 3-foot handle (a natural instinct); turn the hook inside its mouth and pull it out through the lower lip. Hose down the turtle to remove sand and dirt. With one shoe on the turtle's shell, grasp the hooking pole and stretch its head across a chopping block. Next, sever the head from the neck right behind the skull. The neck contains meat and can be cooked.

Now remove the feet and tail. They will be relaxed, so grasp them with pliers and extend them one at a time over the chopping block. Start at the neck end and separate the shell from the lower half of the body by inserting a jackknife one-fourth to one-half

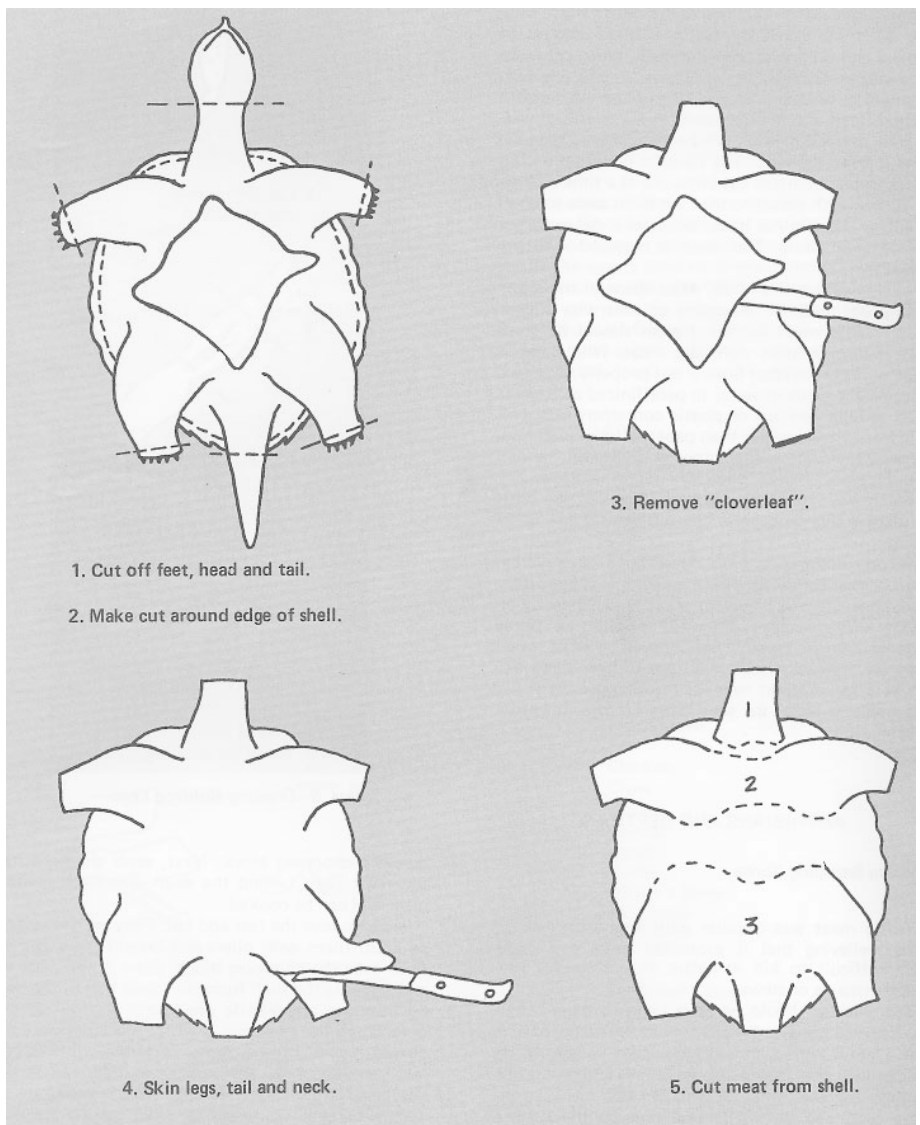


Figure 6. Dressing Snapping Turtle

tasting. To remove the meat from the tail and rear legs, place the blade of the fillet knife in the middle of the hind legs. Cut down all the way to the shell

and as far back to the tail as possible. You have split the legs into halves to make their removal easier.

Remove the vent at this point. Grasp the meat of the hindquarters with one hand and hold onto the shell's edge with the other. Now break the tail and hind leg meat loose from the shell. Lift it out and trim away any yellow fat. Wash the meat in cold running water for several minutes. You should now have one hind half, one fore half and neck meat (see Figure 6). Turtle meat can be pan-fried or used in turtle soup.

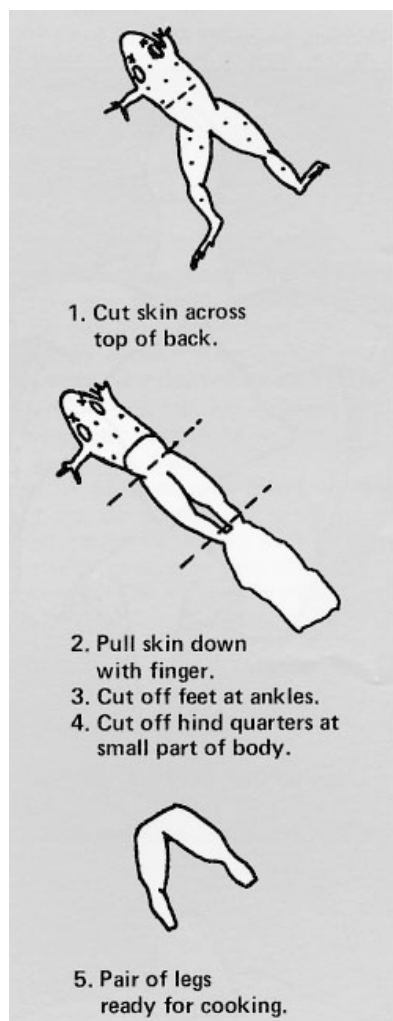


Figure 7. Dressing Bullfrog Legs

Bullfrogs

Frog legs, particularly those of the large bullfrog, were a treasured delicacy of early pioneers and the American Indian. Their method of cooking was much the same as ours today: they skinned the legs, broiled them (they used pointed sticks), then salted and ate them. Sometimes the legs were dipped into a batter of wildfowl eggs and corn meal, then panbroiled over a crackling fire (see Figure 7).

Fish

Since fish are even more likely to spoil than other meats, take care of them immediately after they are caught or else keep them alive until you get them home. If they are not to be cooked immediately, refrigerate them for a day before cooking or freezing. Follow these pointers for freezing fish: scale,

eviscerate, remove heads and fins, wash thoroughly and drain. Package in aluminum foil or plastic wrap. A good way to freeze small fish is in a block of ice. By placing the dressed fish in a paraffin-coated carton (such as a milk carton), and then filling it with cold water and freezing the container, the packages of fish are easy to store (see Figure 8).

COMPARISON OF WILD GAME WITH DOMESTIC MEATS

Each species of meat has a unique taste. "Wild taste" is usually a result of slight spoilage because of improper handling of the meat and/or the use of too many or the wrong kind of spices. Seasonings should be kept simple so that the flavor of the meat will be enhanced, not masked. Use the following list along with the section, *Methods of Cooking Wild Game* in determining how a meat is best prepared. For example, turtle may be braised, fried or stewed using simple chicken recipes.

Pork

Bear
Groundhog /Woodchuck
Muskrat
Opossum
Rabbit
Raccoon
Squirrel
Wild Hog
Armadillo

Fish

Frog Legs
Rattlesnake

Duck and Goose

Duck
Goose
Coot

Beef

Beaver
Deer (venison)

Chicken

Crow
Dove
Grouse
Quail
Turtle
Wilson's Snipe
Woodcock
Turkey

METHODS OF COOKING WILD GAME

Many recipes are available for wild game. They may be found in your home cookbooks, in your local library or on certain web sites.

Simplicity is the key to cooking wild meat. Basic seasonings include the following:

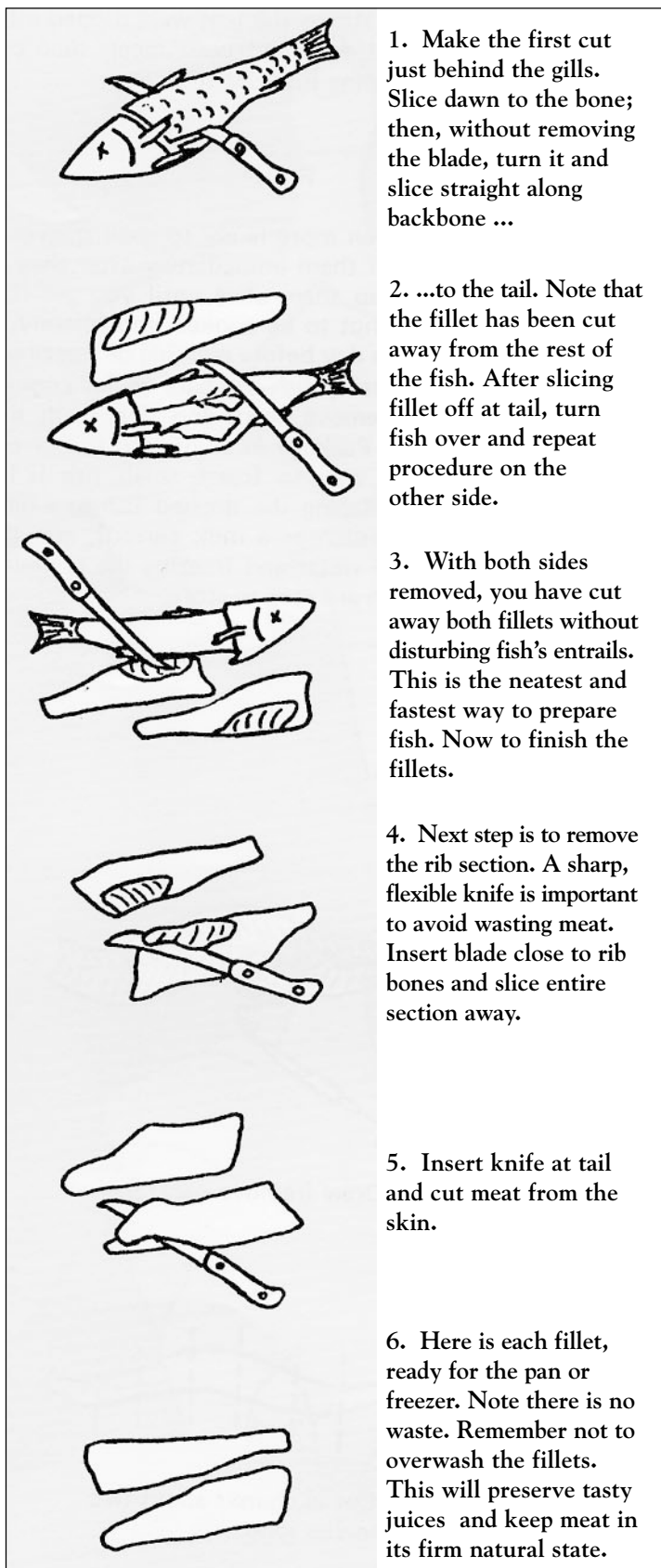


Figure 8. Preparing Fish for Cooking or Freezing

- Salt
- Pepper
- Beef or pork fat
- Onion
- Vinegar
- Worcestershire sauce

Some Special Recipes

Game Gravy

After the game has been removed from the frying pan, leave about two tablespoons of fat and "crusties" in the skillet. Fill an ordinary glass with one cup water. Add to the water salt, pepper, and two chicken or beef bouillon cubes, depending on the type of game fried. Stir two tablespoons of flour in the hot fat in the skillet. When flour has browned, add the water mixture. Cook until the gravy is the desired thickness; if too thick, add more water.

Deer Liver

To prepare deer liver for the table, parboil first, then remove the scum that rises to the top of the water. After half an hour boiling, the liver may be removed and sliced thin. Then fry it in bacon drippings until thoroughly done.

Another way of preparing liver involves cutting it into quarter-inch slices and soaking these for an hour in cold water. Then rinse well in warm water, wipe dry, and roll each piece in flour seasoned with salt and pepper. Fry in bacon drippings (and onions, too, if desired). When the liver is nearly done, bacon may be fried in the same pan and you'll have a delicious platter of liver and bacon. For an added touch, put slices of raw onion on the platter.

Fried Deer Heart

Clean blood from inside, slice off top to remove fat and blood vessels, and soak heart in cold salted water (one teaspoon to the quart) for one hour. Boil 25 minutes, then cut in slices $\frac{3}{8}$ inch thick, salt and pepper, dredge with flour or bread crumbs, and fry in hot fat for about 15 minutes.

Crow and Rice

Refrigerate six crows in saltwater overnight. Cook birds in pressure sauce pan at 10 pounds pressure for 12 to 15 minutes. Take meat off bones, salt to taste. Heat two cans of mushroom soup in a saucepan, adding one-half of the meat. Spread one cup of cooked rice in the bottom of a large casserole dish. Spread remainder of meat over the rice. Add another cup of rice. Pour soup and meat over this rice so that the contents are moist and juicy. Cover dish with aluminum foil and bake in oven for 15 minutes at 350 F. Serves three to six people.

Storing Meat, Poultry and Fish

Keeping meat, poultry and fish cold is the most important rule in maintaining freshness.

Refrigerator

- Store in coldest part of the refrigerator.
- Prepackaged meat may be stored unopened in the original wrapping for one to two days.
- Fresh meat, not prepackaged, should be wrapped loosely in waxed paper or aluminum foil and stored in refrigerator for use within two days.
- Ground meat should be cooked within 24 hours or frozen.
- Poultry and fish should be used within one to two days.
- Leftover meats should be covered or wrapped and refrigerated within two hours after cooking. They may be stored one to two days.

Freezer

- Wrap in moisture-vapor-resistant materials: freezer paper, freezer bags or heavy aluminum foil.
- Press out excess air and seal airtight. Label and date.
- Freeze promptly and keep frozen at 0 F.
- Thaw thin cuts in the refrigerator or take directly from the freezer and cook without previous thawing.
- Meats thawed at room temperature will spoil if allowed to stand too long. When fast thawing is necessary, place wrapped meat under running cold water.
- The best method for thawing all meat, poultry and fish is in the refrigerator.

THINGS TO DO

1. Harvest and dress at least two kinds of game animals. Report to your 4-H group or school class on how the animal was handled in the field and upon arrival at home. Feel free to make suggestions as to how handling might be made easier, safer or result in better tasting meat.

2. Select at least two kinds of game animals for cooking. These might be animals which you have caught or obtained from another hunter. Dress and cook them yourself using recipes which you have chosen. Serve these dishes to members of your family or 4-H group. Get their reaction to the flavor of the meat. Report to your 4-H group or school class on how the meat was dressed and prepared for the table. You may wish to compare two different cooking methods — frying and roasting, for example — for the same game animal.

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Some material in this guide was adapted from existing 4-H literature. Materials taken from: "Dressing Game in the Field," Cooperative Extension Service, University of Georgia, Athens, GA; "Learning to Use Wild Game," Agricultural Extension Service, The University of Tennessee, Knoxville, TN; and "Beavers in Tennessee," Agricultural Extension Service, University of Tennessee, Knoxville, TN.