

Caring for Game Meat

by Dolores Larson

The best chef in the world cannot repair the damage done to improperly handled game meat. A good hunter shoots cleanly, kills instantly and takes pains to protect the meat from spoiling or contamination, knowing that the recipe for a fine meal starts in the field.

Most sportsmen take pride in caring for their game and making it tasteful. Unlike Europeans, who enjoy the wild taste of game, Americans often prefer to remove wild or gamey flavors. If, however, wild game is not correctly cared for in the field, no cook can make it palatable. Hunting skill, dressing, butchering, and transportation all contribute to the quality of game meat.

The hunter must first consider the kill. The best location for a quick and clean kill is a broadside heart-lung shot, low, and just behind the front shoulder. A second choice is the middle of the shoulder, although this will cause more meat loss. While an expert marksman can drop an animal immediately with a brain shot, the animal should be bled rapidly because there is less internal bleeding than encountered with a body shot. Also, a head shot could, of course, spoil the animal if the hunter wants a trophy mount. A misplaced shot in the gut or paunch might allow the animal to escape only to die later, and contact with paunch contents will contaminate meat, while a bad attempt at a head shot could mean problems. A broken jaw will allow the animal to escape, only to die a slow death later.

If it is necessary to carry out the meat from a large animal in more than one trip, extreme care should be taken upon returning to the kill site as it is very possible to find a bear has taken over the carcass. In some areas, Kodiak elk country for example, hunters lose a lot of meat in this manner.

When dragging smaller animals such as deer, or caribou toboggan-style over snow, always pull the head first. The carcass slides easier this way, and it minimizes damage to the skin.

For cutting up game animals in the field, a small emery stone and a steel are nearly as important as a knife. A good hunter knows how to sharpen a knife and keep it sharp. A small, sharp, meat saw is also desirable for dressing big game. Other essential items include: clean wiping cloths; bags for the liver, heart, and tongue; string and rope; cheese cloth or butcher's stockinette; clean canvas covers if you are packing out; a block and tackle for large animals; salt (salt required to cure skins is approximately 1 lb. salt to 4 lbs. skin); black pepper (to discourage flies during some seasons).

Once you are sure your quarry is dead, you can begin field dressing, with the idea of rapidly lowering the temperature of the meat. Get the carcass into a working position propped on its back with ropes or a short stick and begin at once. Lowering the temperature of the meat and keeping it clean are the essential points of this operation. Cutting the carcass into smaller pieces will help it cool.

The following instructions assume the animal's head is not going to be saved for trophy mounting; in that case, different rules would apply. For a trophy mount, there would be no cut in the front of the neck because that is the side of the animal easily seen.

1 If the animal has been shot in the lungs, the most desirable location, it probably will not need to be bled. If it has been shot in the head, begin by draining blood toward the head, and then cut the throat as deep as possible immediately behind the lower jaw. Insert the knife, sharp edge up, at the point of the brisket and cut diagonally, severing the large blood vessels in the neck.

With a sharp, clean knife, held cutting edge up, open the skin of the carcass from the crotch to the chin directly along the median line. Eviscerate by carefully pulling and cutting skin away exposing the intestines. Take care to avoid touching the scent glands located on the hind legs. These glands are identified easily by the long tufts of hair surrounding their openings.

With your knife, carefully cut down to the pelvic bone where the hind legs meet. Next use your saw and cut the pelvic bone between the base of the tail and the exposed intestines. Note that some regulations require that the sex organs remain attached to the unskinned carcass. This cut will expose the intestines and make it easier to keep the animal on its back. Protect the intestines as you cut. If you should accidentally cut the intestines, use string to tie off the cut so the contents will not leak out.

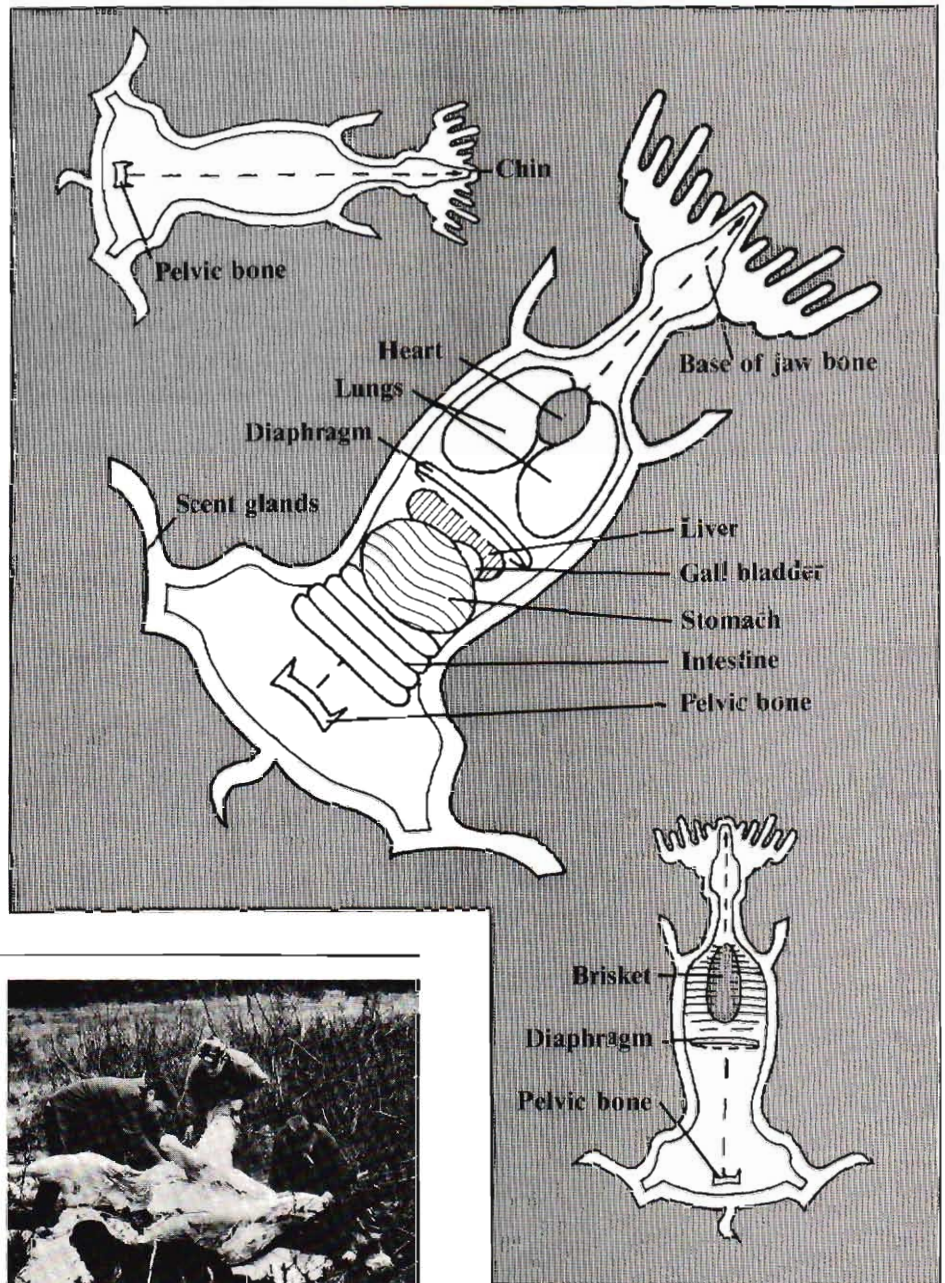
Carefully cut or saw the (brisket bone connecting ribs at the breast) all the way to the neck, allowing the chest cavity to be opened. On large animals the brisket should be removed by cutting the ribs where they connect to the brisket. This will allow easier access to lungs, heart, and diaphragm.

Cut the windpipe and the esophagus

(gullet) at the base of the lower jaw. When cutting the windpipe at the jaw, cut away from the neck, pulling it toward the opening in the brisket. On large animals, it is helpful to attach a rope to the windpipe and have some one pull it taut while you cut away the tissue that connects the lungs and heart to the carcass.

Using a knife, loosen the organs from connecting membranes. Guiding with one hand, slip the knife forward between the stomach and ribs. The diaphragm is the thin muscle separating the stomach from the chest cavity. This muscle can then be cut free while your helper continues to pull on the rope. Continue to peel out the lungs, heart, stomach, etc., as you would clean a chicken. Be careful not to break the gall bladder (bile sac), which is attached to the liver and must be cut off.

Carefully remove the heart and liver, and put them in a sac or bag protected from flies. Also take the viscera away from the carcass to help keep the flies away.



2 Skin the carcass by slitting up the inside of each leg to the knee, starting from the gutting slit. Cut off the leg at the knee joint. By pulling and cutting skin connecting tissue, the hide can be removed quickly. Allow the hide to lay out flat, hair down; this will keep the meat clean when quartering.



3 Quarter the carcass. Remove the head by cutting where it connects to the spine. Find the first rib at the middle of the animal (the short, floating rib), then count down and cut between the second and third rib from the backbone up through the top of the flank. Repeat on the other side, then saw through the backbone, halving the animal. Grab the front legs, then pull the front half up in a sitting position on the ribs, and saw down the center of the backbone. This completes front quartering.



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- 4** Pull up the hind half into a sitting position on the rump and saw down the center of backbone. This completes all four quarters.



- 5** If you need to reduce weight further, count up seven ribs on the front quarters, and cut between the ribs and through the backbone.



- 6** Cut off the front legs and repeat on the other front quarter.



- 7** On the hind quarters, cut off the leg close to the hip bone and at a right angle to the backbone. Repeat on the other hind quarter.



- 8** Cut of lower leg. Repeat on other rear leg.



- 9** Now the animal is in sections. It is much easier to handle.

If flies are a problem, wipe the meat clean, rub blood over all surfaces and allow it to dry, sprinkle lots of pepper on all surfaces, and cover loosely with a meat bag or cheese cloth.

If possible, game meat should be hung and thoroughly cooled at your camp before being brought into town. This is important! Warm meat spoils fast. Your camp is the proper place to age your meat. It will age as much in camp in two or three days as it will in a commercial cool room for a week—this will save aging costs.

If it is raining, spread a tarp over the hanging meat to make a roof, then build a smudge fire, allowing the smoke to enfold the meat. This will protect the meat from dampness and souring.

Be sure the meat is thoroughly clean and dry at all times. In cool weather many people keep the hide on large animals (quartered) for transport. This helps keep the meat clean and free of dirt. On smaller animals, the hide may be left on for short periods of time during transport. Try not to stack meat. If it is necessary to lay meat on the ground for any period of time, make a rack out of branches, allowing air to circulate around all of the meat.

Remember, whatever your choice of animal, good sportsmen take good care of their game. A delicious meal of Alaskan game is more than just meat on the table; it can offer memories of a fair chase and a successful conclusion.

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