

How to Tan a Deer Hide

by Jim Low



Tanning a deer hide is easier than you think.

You bagged your deer, dragged it to the road, hung it, skinned it and processed the meat. All done, right? Well, maybe.

What are you going to do with the hide? Yes, it costs a lot of bucks (no pun intended) to have hides tanned and made into gloves or whatever. But what if you could tan it yourself? Home tanning isn't too complicated; if a caveman could do it, surely you can. It doesn't require exotic equipment or materials, and what else are you going to do while you're kicked back watching football or reruns of Gilligan's Island? Here's how to go about it.

Cleaning

Before you can do anything else, you must remove all the flesh from the inside of the hide. For this job, you'll need a dull knife. It's too easy to cut the skin with a keen blade. If you don't have a dull hunting knife, check the kitchen drawer. Mine always has an assortment of knives that are too dull for slicing and dicing



Removing flesh from inside a hide is easier with a beaming knife. This two-handed tool is pulled over the hide on an inclined board or "beam."

but just a tad too sharp to be considered spoons.

Actually, a spoon with the edge touched up a little is a pretty decent scraper, too. So are a number of other tools, including paint scrapers, putty knives and the caveman's friend, a chip of flint. The tool is less important than your attitude. You must want to get every trace of flesh off the hide.

If you don't finish scraping in one sitting, store the skin carefully until you get back to it. Rub salt liberally on the bare surface of the hide, then fold it hair side out, roll it up, seal it in a plastic bag, and put in the freezer.

Salting the hide offers another benefit besides preservation. It softens any meat left on the hide, making it easier to scrape off.

When you think you've gotten off all the flesh, salt it one more time, roll it up and let it sit in the refrigerator for two or three days. Give it one more light scraping for good measure, then wash in water to remove all the salt. Now you're ready for step two.

Degreasing

You'll need rubber gloves and naphtha, a solvent available at most hardware stores. Put on the gloves, and rub naphtha into both

sides of the hide until it's saturated. Work in a well-ventilated area, and remember that naphtha is *flammable*. Make sure you're well away from gas appliances with pilot lights or other open flames.

Next you need to blot all the naphtha off the hide. You can use clean, absorbent rags or sawdust. Rags are easier to work with, but they don't do as thorough a job stripping the grease-laden naphtha from the hide. Repeat this step several times until the hide feels dry and grease-free.

Rinse the hide in several changes of water until all traces of sawdust and naphtha are gone.

Tanning

Soak the hide in a solution of hydrated lime and wood ashes. Use a quarter cup of lime and a half cup of ashes per gallon of water. Check every couple of days to see if the hair is loosening. When your dull knife (or whatever you used for scraping) will remove hair easily, drain the hide and scrape until all hair is gone.

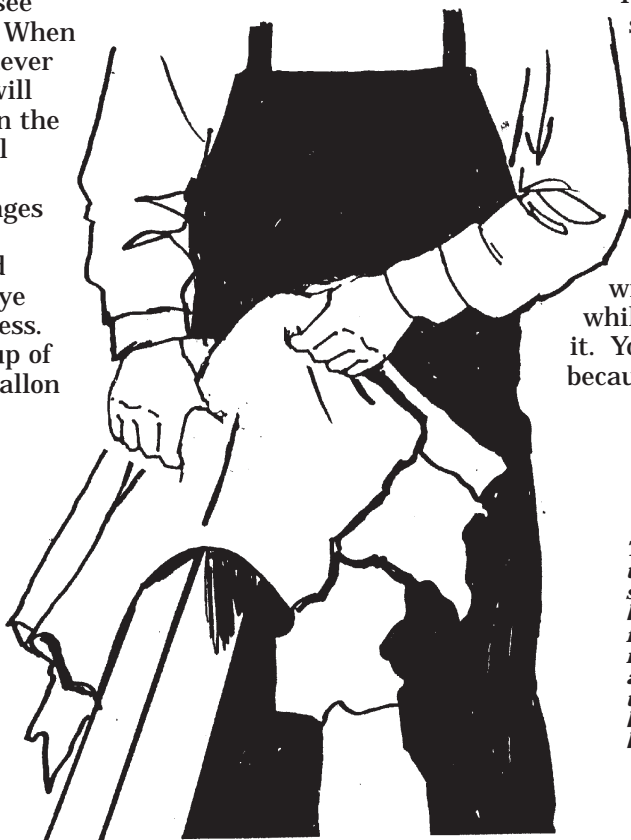
Rinse in several changes of water, then soak overnight in a boric acid solution to remove the lye from the dehairing process. Use about one-eighth cup of boric acid crystals per gallon

of water. Rinse well again.

Next, place the hide in a solution of salt (a half pound per gallon of water) and alum (a quarter pound per gallon). Make sure the hide is covered, and refrigerate for one week. To insure even treatment, stir the hide and solution daily.

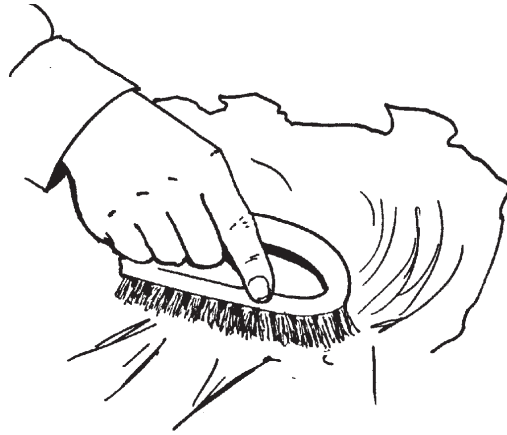
Remove the hide, rinse lightly and hang it up to drain. Don't let it dry completely, though. While it's still damp and soft, rub neat's-foot oil into the flesh side of the hide. When the neat's-foot oil treatment is complete, stretch the hide vigorously in every direction, and work it over the edge of a table or other straight edge with a buffing motion. This will break down the grain of the leather and soften the hide. This is the longest and most demanding part of the tanning process. It also is the most rewarding, as you can feel the hide soften and see it develop into soft, supple leather.

Keep working on tough spots until they soften up. You may have to use the rounded and smoothed end of a large dowel to work the kinks out of stubborn spots. "Breaking" can only be done when the hide is moist. The leather will naturally dry out while you are working with it. You'll know it's getting dry, because it will start to crack.



To make a freshly tanned hide soft and supple, you must break the internal fibers. This is done by rubbing the hide over a straight edge, like the edge of a work bench or a beaming board.

After chemical treatment and partial drying, work neat's-foot oil into the hide to keep it flexible.



Moisten as needed, and continue working.

Your first effort probably won't be perfect. Og the Caveman got lots of practice to improve his technique. If you aren't willing to settle for an amateur product the first time or two, shell out the dough necessary to have a professional do the job. You'll get better, though. This isn't rocket science; anyone can do it if they really want to.

When you're all through, you'll have the makings for a knife sheath, a muzzleloading "possibles" pouch, a pair of moccasins or any number of other useful items that will remind you of the successful hunt every time you use them.

You may even find you enjoy tanning hides. If you aren't careful, you might become a buck-skinner, decked out from head to toe in hand-tanned finery. If nothing else, you'll develop a fuller appreciation for your ancestors, who made their own clothing, tents and tools from animal skins.

The techniques described here work equally well for the skins of coyotes, squirrels or just about any other mammal, although I haven't tried it on an armadillo yet. If you get to that particular challenge before I do, let me know how you used the end product. It would probably make a fine toaster cozy!



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