

Chapter 9

HIDE PRESERVATION, TANNING, AND CLOTHING REPAIR

“Whoever coined the saying ‘an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure’ must have been thinking about survival.”

—BRIAN EMDIN, *SURVIVAL SECRETS*

If you are hunting and trapping during your time in the wilderness, you might also consider using animal hides to manufacture additional resources. Here you’ll learn the methods for removing, fleshing, and drying hides as well as how preserved hides can be used.

SMALL HIDES

Small hides from animals such as rabbit, muskrat, and fox are easy to manipulate and can be manufactured quickly. They tend to be too thin for most clothing articles but make sturdy small bags, pouches, quivers, and muffs.

CASING

Casing is a process of removing the hide from the carcass that works well for smaller animals. To case an animal, you remove the skin from the one side of the carcass to the other in one continuous piece, almost like a tube.



Casing a hide

FLESHING AND DRYING

Fleshing refers to the process of removing all the meat and membrane from the gut side of the hide. Cased hides dry very efficiently on a fleshing beam. **Fleshing beams** can be easily constructed with a large log and a homemade tripod. Find a log about 8" in diameter and strip off all of the bark. Use the tripod to elevate one end of the log. This process is essential because any meat left on the hide will go rancid. If you want to use a hide without hair, to make leather for example, then either pull off the hair during the fleshing process or soak the hide in ash water for a couple of days and then strip the hair.

Once the flesh is removed, you can fashion a small stretcher to dry the hide completely. Stretchers manufactured from wire are available commercially, but they can also be made

from flexible saplings.

LARGE HIDES

Large hides from animals such as deer can be split and sewn together for more involved projects like clothing and shelter resources.

SPLITTING

The most effective way to remove a hide from a large carcass is to split the hide. In this process you hang an animal upside down and cut the belly to open the hide with the gut side out. From here you cut across both inside back legs between the anus and vent or penis, and from there you basically strip the hide down off the carcass similar to the way you would pull off a shirt.

BUSHCRAFT TIP

Fleshing knives work well for removing the flesh from a large hide. These knives have a dull, hard edge and are available commercially, or you can use a split bone from the animal itself.

Once all of the flesh is removed, you will need to stretch the large hide on a rack. You can make a square rack from sturdy saplings; it should be at least one-third larger than the hide you plan to stretch on it.

Use your knife to make holes in the edges of the hide, about ½" from the edge so that the hide can dry without tearing. Use any type of cord to lace through the holes and stretch the hide on the stretching rack. Take care to preserve the original shape of the hide as you stretch it.

RAWHIDE

When the hide has been fleshed and dried and the hair has been removed you will have rawhide. Rawhide can be used for many things.

RAWHIDE PRODUCTS

Rawhide is an amazing resource. You can get it wet, form it, and when it dries it will be hard as plastic. It can be used for anything from containers to knife sheaths. Many Native American tribes along the western frontier used rawhide envelopes or bags known as parfleches to carry things such as dried meats, supplies, and clothing. Rawhide can be cut into strips with shears like leather. You can even drive a sharp knife or axe into a tree stump and draw the leather through the blade to split it into two pieces. These strips can be used for lashing projects, twisted into bowstring, or even used for lacing if you slice them narrowly enough.

MAKING LEATHER

From the point of rawhide, you can actually take things a step further into the craft of tanning. You will need to wet the rawhide once more so that it is flexible but not so wet that you have to wring water out of it.

BRAIN TANNING

To tan an animal hide you need tannins, which you can get from the brain of the animal. Heat some water in a pot over the fire but be careful that it does not boil. Cut off a little bit of the brain and mix it into the water very well so that it turns into a paste. Once the paste is ready, you will rub it onto the hide with your hands like a lotion. If you decided to leave hair on the hide, just make sure not to place this paste on the hair side. Once the paste is thoroughly rubbed into the hide, the entire piece needs to be folded up and kept cool for 24–48 hours. The tanning will do its job during this resting period.

After this waiting period it is time to rough the hide. During this process you will squeegee any moisture and material off the hide so that it begins to dry. Spread the hide out on your stretcher or fleshing beam and use a dull hand-scraping device. Once the hide is dry it will need to be stretched and broken by hand. You can tie a rope between two trees and drape the hide over it or hang it over a dull wood stake so that the fibers start to break. When the hide is completely dry and soft you will have garment-grade, brain-tanned leather.

You will need to waterproof the leather or else it will go back to hard-shell if it gets wet. Build a tripod around a small fire that only smolders so that it creates a lot of smoke but not very much heat. Drape the hide over the tripod and fire so that it becomes completely saturated from the smoke and leave it there for a couple of hours. The hide will darken during this time. Take great care not to let the hide get too hot or scorch.

As you can see, making leather is labor-intensive, and keeping many hides in process at different stages makes things go easier. Either way, always be prepared with some manmade fabrics just in case you need something in the short term.

BARK TANNING

Bark tanning is a very complicated process and is not very practical if you are traveling light in the wilderness. I mention it here, however, because a lot of people believe that this is the only true way to produce real leather. This very old tradition was brought over by the colonists from Europe. The most complicated part of bark tanning is the time it takes and the size of the containers needed to accomplish it.

In this process you use tannins from trees such as walnut and white oak to tan the hide. Bark liquor is made by boiling large amounts of bark in three large batches of varying concentrations. The first batch is made very strong and then poured into a 15-gallon storage container. A second batch, a little bit weaker than the first, is poured into another large container. Then a third batch, the weakest yet, is made and poured into a third large container. It takes this much bark liquor for one deer hide.

Soak the hide in the first batch for a couple of weeks. During the first few days you must stir it often and then several times a day after that. The hide is then stored in the second batch of bark liquor for 4 weeks with the same stirring frequency. The hide is stored in the last batch for up to 12 weeks. Winter will be over by the time you get this far. At this point you still need to oil the hide, dry it, break down the fibers, and waterproof. You can see that although bark tanning makes the finest leather, it is a major undertaking.

CLOTHING REPAIR AND REPRODUCTION

When you are out in the wilderness for a long stay there is no question that clothing may need to be repaired. The main purpose of clothing is to provide protection from the elements and environment. Damaged clothing cannot do this job well and will likely only get further damaged over time. In *Bushcraft 101* we discussed the importance of carrying a sail needle and cordage for clothing repairs. For longer-term outings, however, you will require more substantial clothing repair supplies in your kit. You should carry a couple of needles, multiple threads, possibly a small pair of scissors, and a bit of fabric material for patching. You need to think not just about repairs but also construction of new clothing to replace items that cannot be repaired.

Here are the items you should carry:

SMALL CLOTHING REPAIR KIT

- Three different sail needles of varying dimensions
- Several feet of small diameter #6–8 bankline or thread

EXTENDED CLOTHING REPAIR KIT

- Several sail needles in various sizes
- Several glover's needles in various sizes
- Lock stitch awl with spare needles
- Several types of threads from waxed linens to nylon lines
- Scissors
- Shears for cutting thicker materials
- Stitching palm
- Small mallet or maul
- Spiked awl
- Beeswax
- Cloth tape measure
- Several square feet of canvas, wool, and cotton