

## INTRODUCTION

You have your deer down. Your hunting skills and persistence have paid off. Now what do you do? The knowledge you use next will determine the quality of your big game meat and of your mounted trophy. Proper care of harvested game is the most important criterion to ensure its value as food. This publication was prepared to assist you in the proper care of your game in the field. Deer are used as examples in the following procedures. The information can also be applied to other big game animals.



## CHRONIC WASTING DISEASE

In the late 1990s, the New Mexico Department of Game and Fish (NMDGF) began surveying wild ungulates for chronic wasting disease (CWD). In 2002, CWD was documented for the first time in New Mexico in a mule deer on White Sands Missile Range. Chronic wasting disease has changed how hunters approach hunting and processing wild ungulates because of the uncertain potential for transmission to humans.

The agent that causes CWD is a mis-folded prion, a type of protein. Normal prion proteins are common in mammals and are associated with cells found throughout the body, especially the brain. Prions that change and transform into mis-folded and abnormal prions are the causative agent in CWD and similar diseases. These abnormal prions transform normal prion proteins when they come in direct contact with them.

Chronic wasting disease affects the central nervous system, especially the brain. In early stages of infection, prions are known to accumulate in the brain, spinal cord, eyes, spleen, tonsils, pancreas, and lymph nodes. In more advanced stages, prions

accumulate in a greater variety of tissues, including the kidneys, lungs, heart, and muscles. Animals with CWD may be asymptomatic and show no sign of infection. Signs of late-stage CWD include lack of awareness, drooping head and ears, lethargy, emaciation, chronic thirst, reluctance to leave water, and frequent urination. Animals behaving unusually should not be harvested, and you should notify NMDGF with the time and specific location of observations of animals exhibiting unusual behavior. Take the following precautions when handling harvested big game.

- Wear rubber gloves when field dressing.
- Bone out meat in the field.
- Minimize handling of brain and spinal tissue.
- Avoid consuming portions of the animal known to accumulate prions. Normal field dressing and cutting away fatty tissues removes most of these tissues.

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- Do not eat meat from animals that are known to be infected.
- Wash hands thoroughly after field dressing is complete.
- Destroying prions is very difficult; soaking field dressing and processing tools in a 1:1 bleach: water mixture for 60 minutes and then thoroughly rinsing with clean water is the best readily available method to clean equipment.

Contact NMDGF for the latest information on locations of CWD-positive animals and status of the harvested animals testing program.

## **BLEEDING**

Use extreme caution when approaching an animal you have harvested to avoid serious or fatal injury. Touch the eye of the animal with the muzzle of your rifle or tip of your arrow to ensure the animal is dead. If the animal has been shot in the chest area, or if a major artery has been severed due to a shot, sufficient blood loss has occurred. It's important to note that unless the animal's heart is still beating, no significant blood loss will occur by severing the throat. If your trophy is to be mounted, do not cut the animal's throat. This can ruin the cape of your trophy and cause your taxidermist additional work, not to mention the added cost to you. If the animal is not yet dead, administer an additional shot to the vitals to dispatch the animal.

## **FIELD DRESSING**

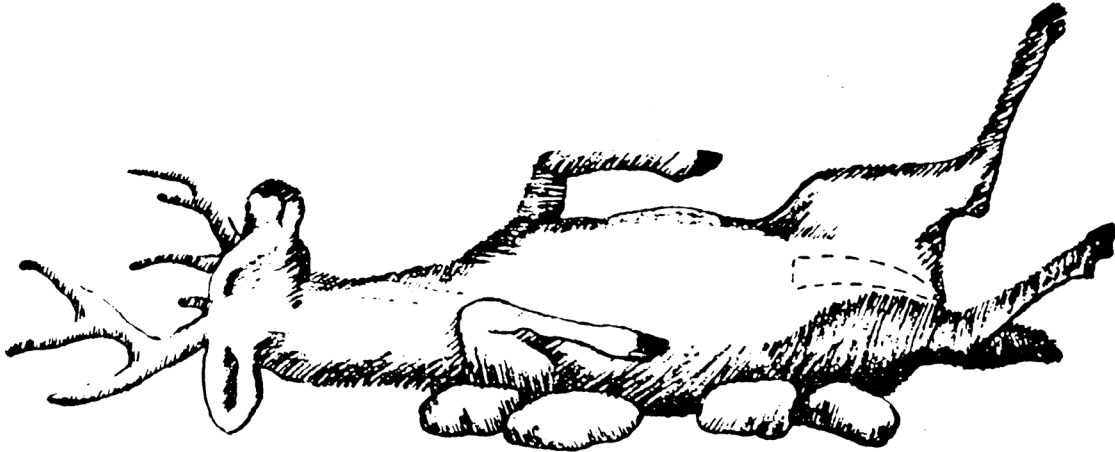
Tag the animal immediately to comply with game laws. Before beginning the field dressing, make sure your knife is sharp. A sharp knife minimizes unintentional cuts, and the entire job will require less effort. To make the field dressing simpler, take your time. Mistakes made in haste usually make the job more difficult than it needs to be.

Some hunters feel it is essential to remove the tarsal glands inside the knees between the hind legs, but this is not necessary. It is important, however, to avoid touching the meat after touching any glands or waste.

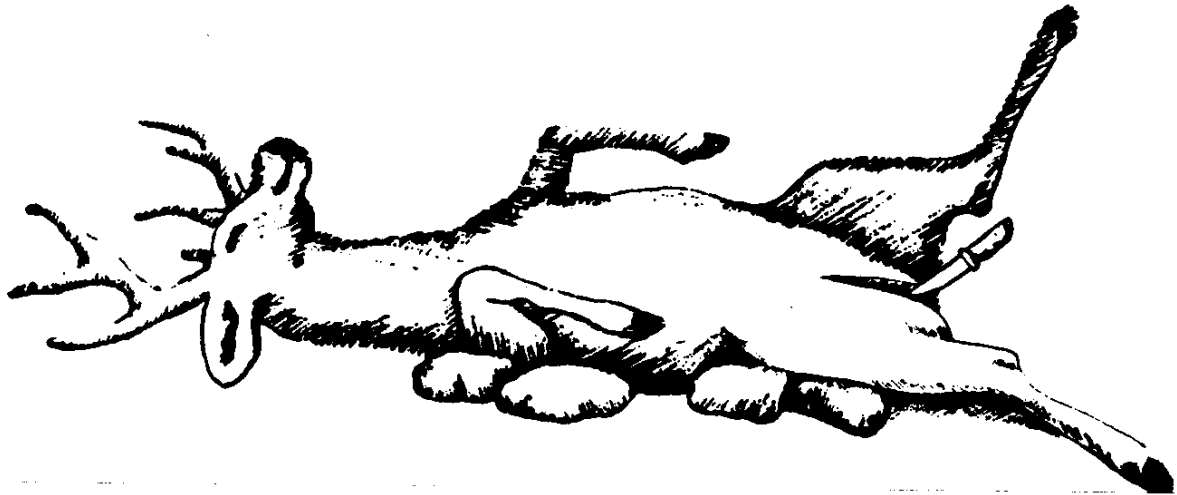
Prop the animal on its back and begin field dressing by cutting the skin and muscle around the anus. This can be done easily with the same cutting action used to core an apple. This cut should be 3 or 4 inches deep. After the anus is free, pull this vent area out a few inches and tie it off with a short piece of string. If the animal is a female, the sex organ should be detached from the body cavity by cutting it away from the muscle tissue along with the anus. Cut the female's mammarys away from the lower abdomen at this time. If the animal is a male, proceed by removing the genitals (Figure 1). Separate the penis from the abdomen by cutting the skin and connective tissue back to the testicles. Continue to separate the penis and testicles from the body, being careful not to sever the tubes running into the pelvic cavity. The tubes that connect the penis and testicles enter the pelvic cavity just above the anus and must all be left intact.

Cut down to the pelvic bone (Figure 2). This cut is made in the center between the hind legs. One of the hams may be damaged if you do not center this cut. Now turn the knife, blade side up, and make a cut from the pelvis up to the breastbone, or sternum (Figure 3). Use your two fingers on the hand that is not holding the knife to keep the entrails away from the point of the blade. Extend the cut through the breastbone and up into the chest cavity. The breastbone can be cut easily by avoiding the center of the sternum and making the cut along one side of the breastbone. The cartilage and bone are much softer on the sides than in the middle of the sternum. If you plan to save the cape, do not cut any farther forward than an imaginary line drawn all the way around the animal's chest directly behind the shoulders.

Reach as far forward as possible into the chest cavity and sever the esophagus and windpipe. Roll the animal on its side and then cut the diaphragm (the thin layer of muscle separating the heart and lungs from the stomach) away from the rib cage on the "up side" of the carcass. When cutting through the diaphragm, be careful not to puncture the stomach. By rolling the animal on its side, you let gravity work to your advantage by moving the heart, lungs, and viscera out of your way. Repeat this procedure on the other side until you have all connective tissue detached from the body cavity.



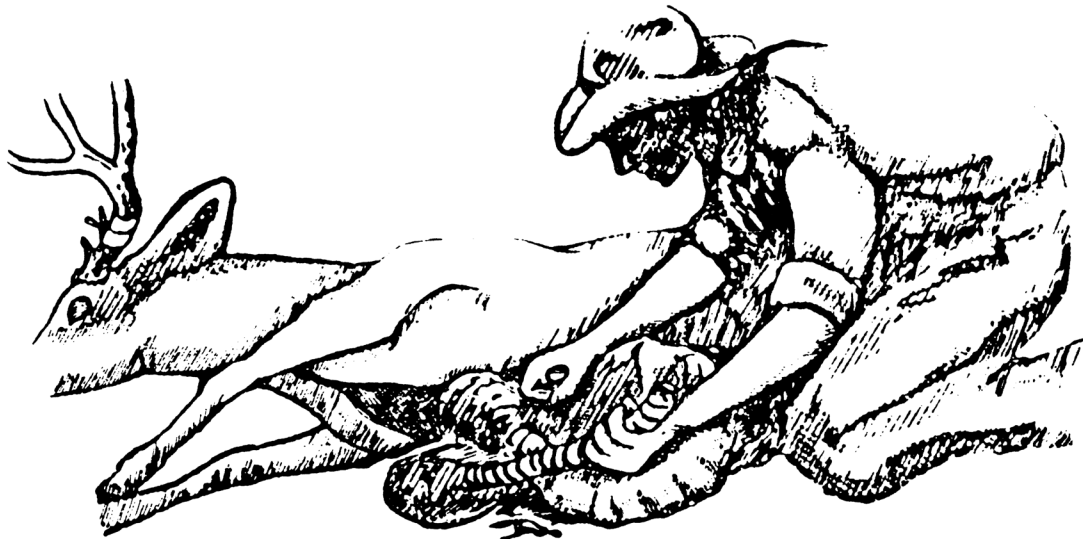
*Figure 1.* Cut under genitals and remove back to the testicles.



*Figure 2.* Cut to the pelvic bone exactly between the hind legs.



*Figure 3.* Make a cut from the pelvis to the breastbone.



*Figure 4.* Pull the entrails free from the cavity.

You can now pull the entrails free from the carcass (Figure 4). Pull the penis, testicles, and anus, which should all be attached together, back through the pelvis and out of the body cavity. It may be necessary to cut some connective tissue free as the anus and testicles are pulled back through the body. Take care to avoid severing the urinary or fecal tract during this process to prevent spilling waste into the body cavity.

The carcass must be cooled as soon as possible. If the outside temperature is warm, elevate the animal above the ground to facilitate air circulation around the entire body. This can be accomplished by hanging the animal in a cool, shady place. Hang the animal head down using a gambrel or a heavy stick placed between the tendon and hocks of each rear leg (Figure 5). Attach a rope to the gambrel or stick and suspend the carcass above the ground. To

aid air circulation and cooling, prop the body cavity open with a stick; it may be necessary to split the pelvis on very large animals. On large animals, use a hatchet or saw to split the pelvis; attempting to break the pelvis with a knife can damage or ruin your blade. Skinning your game will greatly increase cooling in warm temperatures and is necessary to prevent spoilage.

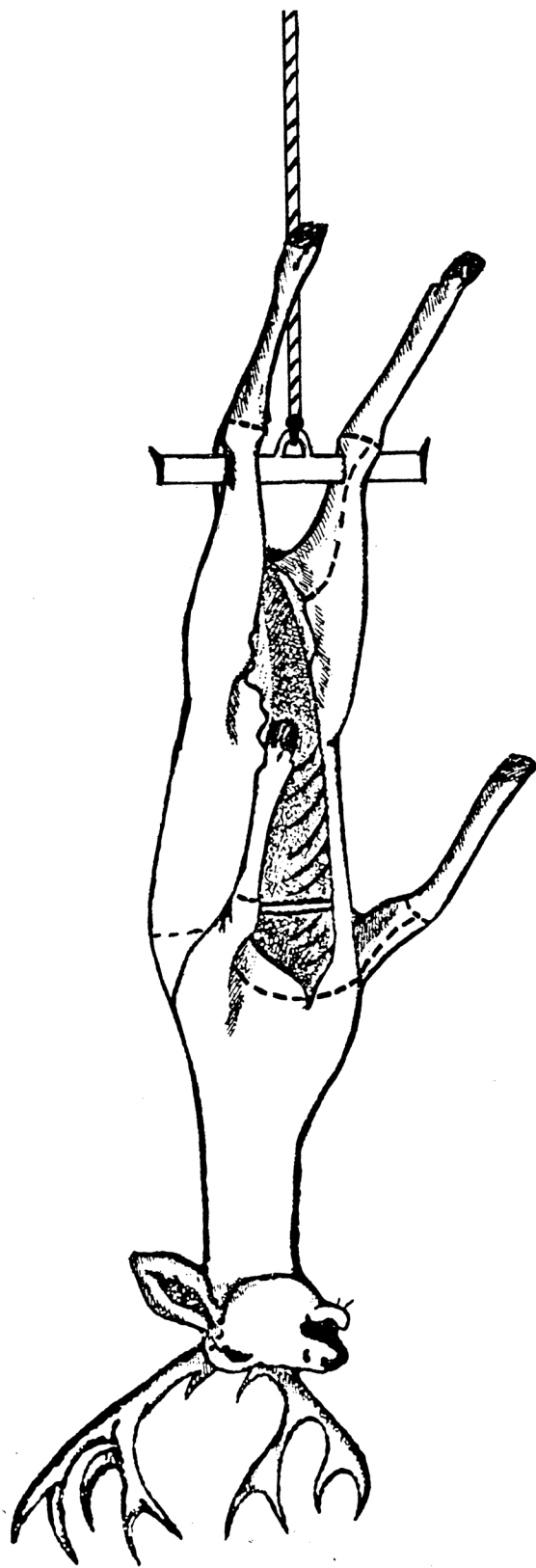
If temperatures stay at or around 32°F, then venison can be aged for as long as 10 to 12 days. Watch the carcass carefully if temperatures increase above 45°F during the day or if the carcass does not remain shaded at all times. Use cheesecloth or light cotton bags to protect the meat from insects. Rubbing the meat with black pepper is an option to deter insects in an emergency situation. Aging improves the tenderness, but may increase the trimming losses due to dehydration.

If temperatures do not permit the carcass to remain outside, transport your game to a meat locker as soon as possible. Another option in warm weather conditions is to quarter your game carcass and place it on ice. If iced down adequately, meat can be kept for several days in this fashion. Water from the melting ice will not harm the meat and quarters can be rinsed free from bloody water when preparing to process the carcass.

## SKINNING

Hang the carcass from the hind legs for skinning. Begin by cutting the hide around the hock and knee and then down the inside of each leg (Figure 5). Consider how the cuts on the inside of the legs will look once the hide is removed. Remove the hide by grasping the skin and pulling hard with both hands. Use your knife carefully when freeing the hide from the carcass to avoid cutting the skin. If the flesh begins to pull off with the skin, stop pulling and try again after cutting the flesh back with the skinning knife. The thin muscles of the abdomen will pull off easily with the hide, so patience and careful knife work are usually required on this part of the carcass.

If the cape is to be saved, you can cut the middle and rear portion of the hide free from the cape when you reach the area just behind the shoulders. This is achieved by simply cutting the hide all the way around the body just behind the shoulders until the skin is free. Do not cut the hide in half behind the shoulders if you want to keep the entire



*Figure 5.* To remove hide, make preliminary cuts as indicated.



skin intact for tanning purposes. Continue to skin toward the head. When you reach the base of the neck, pull the hide downward, turning the hide inside-out. This will require some effort and is best achieved by grasping the hide very close to the neck while pulling and tugging downward. When you get the skin rolled back all the way to the base of the head, you can then carefully saw the head free from the neck just below the bottom jaw. If you do not have a saw, you can cut through the neck muscles down to the bone, making sure to free all muscle and tissue. At this point, someone will need to hold the carcass while you twist the head 360 degrees. If all tissue is cut loose, the last vertebra will break free from the base of the skull and the head and skin will now be free from the carcass.

### CAPING THE TROPHY HEAD

Special care is needed if you want the head to be mounted for your trophy room, or if you want to sell the cape to a taxidermist. There are two ways to proceed with caping. One method involves cutting the cape up the back of the neck for the entire length. This is a common method that makes skinning out the neck much easier, but it will require a great deal of sewing on the part of your taxidermist. The second method, which is illustrated in this circular, will create less work for your taxidermist and often results in a higher-quality mount.

Begin by making an 8- to 10-inch cut up the neck as illustrated in Figure 6. This requires that the head be detached from the body, as discussed in the **SKINNING** section, so that the head can be worked back through the 8- to 10-inch slit in the cape. The cape is detached from the rest of the hide by making a cut all the way around the rib cage just behind the shoulders. When caping the head, pull the hide free from the flesh, taking care not to cut the skin. A knife cut in the head portion of the cape can be very difficult for a taxidermist to hide. Be extra careful around the eyes and tear duct area in the inside corner of the eye socket. It may help to put your finger in the deer's eye from the outside and cut the connective tissue around the eye, but be careful not to cut yourself.

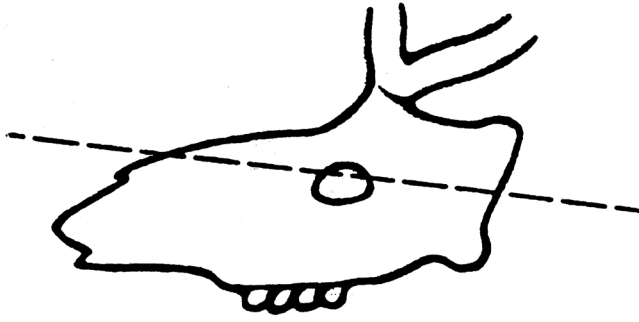
When skinning around the mouth, leave as much of the lip tissue connected to the cape as possible so that the taxidermist can split the lips from the inside



*Figure 6.* To remove the cape, make a short cut along the back of the neck and between the antlers.

to make a realistic mount. The ears can be cut off close to the skull. Use your fingers and a blunt object to separate the hide from the back side of the ear cartilage. Do not attempt to cut the cartilage loose from the ear. Simply turn the ears inside-out with the cartilage still attached to the front part of the ears, and the taxidermist will take care of the rest.

Remove all meat from the scalp and salt the hide liberally. Roll it with the flesh side in and allow it to drain for 24 hours. Re-salt until all moisture is removed. Store in a cool, dry place until the cape can be taken to the taxidermist. Antlers should be sawed from the skull (Figure 7), and all meat and tissue should be removed. Many places pay cash for hides or capes, or you can have gloves or other garments made from the skin of your harvested trophy.



**Figure 7.** Remove the antlers from the skull by sawing as indicated.

Special attention and care given to game meat is well worth the effort and will pay off by rewarding you with many delicious meals.

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