

Trophy Field Preparation

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EDITOR'S REMARKS

We appreciate Doug taking the time to illustrate how to properly cape an animal for The Huntin' Fool membership. It's nice to see it done from an industry professional as we all want our trophies to be preserved the best way possible. Thanks again Doug for such a great, informative article!

—Garth



DOUG ROFFERS

If you are anything like me, part of the dreaming about your upcoming hunt involves a well-designed, artistically displayed taxidermy mount of your desired trophy. You will probably spend several months planning and preparing for this adventure, and undoubtedly many thousands of dollars for a few moments of sheer excitement. After the smoke has cleared and the handshakes and photos are over, the best way of preserving the animal is in the form of a high quality taxidermy piece that will relive those dreams for many years.

With your trophy lying before you, it is a good opportunity to decide on what type of mount you would like to display.



PHOTO 1

Sometimes this decision is easy, other times a bit tough. Whether you choose a shoulder mount, $1/2$ life-size, or full life-size mount, the proper preparation begins right then. If a shoulder mount is desired, the prep work is a bit less than a life-size, but it is still vital to take proper care and do things right.

Depending on the time of the year, your trophy may need a short incision because of short hair. It is difficult to conceal an incision in very shorthaired capes of most big game species. So to remedy this just make a 6 to 8 inch incision behind the head on the back center of the neck to be able to get the head out of the cape. (Photo 1) After you have made the remaining cuts I will describe, skipping the full length cut up the back of the neck, you will then “tube” the cape forward.

The area where we still see the most mistakes made is in the length of the cape skin. As a rule we ask that hunters and guides cut the skin at the halfway point between the front shoulder and rear quarter. (Photo 2) At the least we need 6” behind the front leg and completely around the animal. Cut around the front leg at the knee. Next you will cut the skin up the rear of the front leg staying to the outside when approaching the brisket area. Never cut into the brisket skin.

For longer haired animals after mid-October in most regions of North America you then cut, from the circular cut around the animal, up the center of the neck to the head. (Photos 3-4) . The farther north the region the longer the hair will



PHOTO 2



be earlier in the year. In most of Canada by mid-September the hair length is long enough for full neck length cuts. But again, a short incision on a shorter haired cape is preferred and then just “tube” the cape forward. For life-size mounts on species like Mountain goat and sheep we prefer to have a full length “dorsal incision” along the spine for skinning (Fig 1). On species like bears, cougars, and wolves a “ventral” or belly incision is best, especially cougars (Fig 2).

Now with the cuts all made you can skin the cape off the body. Skin the cape as close to the head as possible and out through the meat at the narrowest point behind the head. If you get your knife into the joint between the spine and skull and break most of the membrane you can twist the head off from the body. (Photo 5) Note the amount of preferred cape with brisket after removed from the body. (Photo 4)

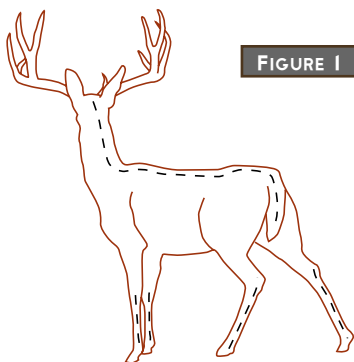


FIGURE 1

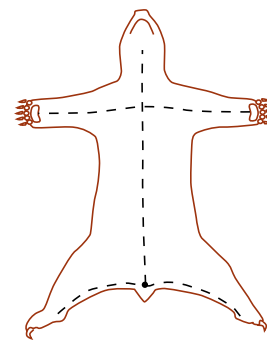


FIGURE 2

DORSAL SKINNING FOR LIFE SIZED MOUNT

VENTRAL SKINNING FOR LIFE SIZED MOUNTS OR RUGS



With the cape and head removed we now can remove the skin from the skull. Start here with a “Y” incision between the ears to the back of each antler burr. (Photos 7-8) Next you will need to work your knife tip around the burr next to the skull being careful to leave all skin attached to the cape, not the antlers. (Photo 9)

Run the tip of your knife into the tear duct to get all the skin out. (Photo 12) Once past the eyes you will meet the lips. Now cut through the lip skin directly toward the skull and you will expose the teeth. Cut next to the teeth all the way around the mouth and leave as much lip skin attached to the cape as possible.

You will also need to cut the ear canal through. Keep your knife close to the skull and cut through the muscle until you reach the skin again below the ear butt. As a general rule while skinning the head, keep your knife close to the skull and always make your cuts closer to the skull and you should minimize any holes or slips in the cape. But remember a few little holes should not be a concern either, a good taxidermist can repair minor mistakes.

On the nose area, you will notice on the top of the head where the skull ends and cartilage begins. (Photo 14) Cut through the cartilage down to the bottom area of the skull and turn the knife 90° and continue forward until you remove the cape from the skull. (Photos 13 & 15) Your cape is now bone free and ready to pack out. At this point, if the skin still has any body warmth in it, spread it out for a few minutes to cool before rolling up and putting in a bag. You can now eliminate the weight of the skull by sawing the antlers free from the skull.

Once around both antlers you immediately meet the eye orbit. Again remember to cut close to the skull and you will keep the eyelids attached to the cape. A good idea here is to place your finger on the eyelid on the hair side, cut behind “so to speak” your finger and you will have the eyelid on the cape. (Photos 10-11)

On some species like sheep and antelope it is a good idea to get any blood out of capes and skins while it is fresh. If you are near any cold clean water source wash the blood out of soiled areas as much as possible. If the skin is badly blood soaked, don't be afraid to completely submerge the skin





and wash it out. You might want to wait until you reach a point where the pack-out is mostly over or the extra weight will be a burden. On a sheep hunt in BC a few years ago I packed out my life-size skin to base camp and washed it 2 days after it was killed. The key is using cold water to break the blood down. The skin will tan out much nicer as there will be no stains to deal with later. After washout, hang to drain for an hour before salting.

A frequently asked question is, "Should I salt the skin?" Salting skins and capes is great, if the prep work has been done. Prepping of lips (split), ears (turned) and having all flesh removed is very important before salt should be applied. If you will be spending several days in warm weather, you will need to at least remove as much flesh as possible and keep the skin in a cool area. Skins are forgiving if you can get the meat and fat removed and kept in the shade.

With some very basic rules applied to your trophies, you will have a cape that taxidermists will be happy to work with. Just like quality meat begins with proper field care, so does quality taxidermy. The time invested in the field will pay

dividends for many years to come. High quality taxidermy is not a cheap endeavor but replacing capes and skins makes it even more costly.

Lastly, choosing a taxidermy studio to preserve your trophies can be as tough as choosing a backpack or a pair of boots. Taxidermy studios come in many varieties also. There are many differences in quality, service, turnaround time, and prices. The best advice I can give is to try to not lump all studios as the same. There are many quality service oriented shops in business and some not as well. Just try not to let price be your only deciding factor as you look for a dependable studio.

If you need to keep costs in check at the time, do it with the habitat, not on your mount. The habitat can always be redone and updated at a later date, but your taxidermy is where you should not cut corners, it is usually permanent. If you are quality minded in your gear, your outfitter and your guide, and desire quality experiences, you owe it to yourself and the animal to finish the adventure with a quality mount.

