

Muskrat Handling

Like with all furbearers, it is best to start with a clean dry animal before skinning. It's a lot easier to get fur to dry when it's still on the carcass than after it's skinned. When it's on the carcass the fur is held out, and some what in shape, so the fur will separate and air can get down in deep, once it's skinned, the fur will collapse on itself, inhibiting air movement. Fortunately muskrat are one of the easier furs to dry on the carcass. If there's snow on the ground, just roll it around good, and rub some snow on the fur between the front legs, and the snow will wick the moisture right out of the fur. When you don't have snow, just take a newspaper, a normal fold (four pages) is just the right width to lay the muskrat on crossways, and roll it to the other end. If the muskrat is real wet, change the paper after you see it soak through, and take an old towel and rub down the area between the front legs, just like you would with snow, since the paper will not contact the fur here. If you do need to leave the muskrat overnight before skinning, just make sure it's on its back, otherwise you'll end up with a green belly.

Muskrat are the simplest furbearer to skin; you actually use the knife very little. I like the same knife for muskrat as I do for most skinning, a five inch, straight, stiff bladed boning knife. I've used Forschner brand for years and found it to be a tough knife that really holds an edge, and it's also cheap enough that you won't cry if you lose one!

Everything I'm going to describe is if you are right handed; just reverse it if you're a south paw.

Lay the rat on the table on its back, head left, tail right. Hold the back foot of the rat closest to you which is the right foot. Put the point of the knife right at the edge of the fur line, where the Achilles tendon is, with the sharp edge of the knife to the right, back of the knife towards the rat. Poke the point of the knife just under the skin and push toward the base of the tail so the knife point comes back out just past the vent. With the rat still lying in the same position, let go of the back foot and grasp the tail with



your left hand, re-insert the knife where it came out and slide it just under the skin to the fur line at the ankle of the opposite foot. After the knife is down to the ankle you might want to let go of the tail, and grab the knee of the far leg so you can guide the knife out in the right spot. With a sharp knife it will make a nice clean cut as you slide it under the skin. You can go in at one heel at out at the other, but to me it's much harder to do without cutting the belly, meaning you'll have to deal with intestines shortly!



Now that you have the cut clear across, roll the rat over onto its belly, still head left and tail right. Take your right thumb and forefinger, one of each side of the base of the tail on the fur, and pinch the skin up onto the top of the tail bone. Now, holding the knife the same as you did before, slide it between the skin and the top of the tail bone. As you push the knife through, out a little pressure to the right and you'll slice right out over the top of the tail, this will give you the back tab to hook on.

Set the knife down, for most muskrats you are done with it until you get to the ears. For some of the great big rats you might need it for a quick cut at the ankles, but most will strip right out. One thing you might have noticed by now is, all of your cutting has been from the inside out; everything will cut easier if you don't try to cut through the hair side.

Back to the rat, it's still laying head left and tail right. Grasp the tail with the right hand, and pinch the flap on top the tail between your left thumb and first knuckle of your left hand. Pull away from the tail with your left hand while rolling your thumb under, stripping the skin loose up over the hips.



With the tail still in your right hand, work the skin loose over the thigh away from you with your thumb. When you have your thumb worked clear up to the inside of the ankle, let go of the tail with your right hand and grab the foot by your left hand, twist the foot so the knee pops up, now push with your left thumb and it will push right through and you can just strip the skin off at the ankle, this is where you might need to use the knife if it's a real tough old rat. Grasp the tail with your right hand again, and use you left thumb to strip down to the ankle closest to you. Grasp the foot with your right hand, twist the knee up and push your thumb through just like you did on the other side.



Turn the rat a quarter turn so the head is facing you. With you thumbs on the fur, push up and over inside the skin with your fingers, and strip the skin loose up to about the back of the rib cage and over the sides of the belly.

Keep a hold on the skin with your left hand, grasp the rat over the top of the head and shoulders with your right hand. Pick the rat up and set him on his butt, just like a dog begging for food. Now, push down and away with your right hand while you pull up and toward you with you left hand. When you get the hang of it you'll now have rat that's stripped up over the back to the shoulders, and still attached down the belly side to the vent.

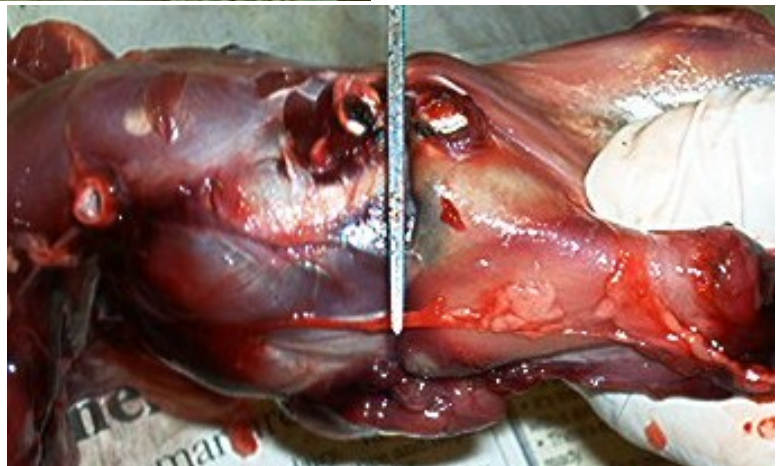


With your right hand still in the inverted skin, grasp the rib cage with your left hand, thumb on one side, fingers on the other. Work your thumb and fingers back and forth stripping the skin loose from the rib cage. Once you get the skin loose across the rib cage, take your right hand out, grasp the skin through the same separation, and simply pull away with both hands, this will strip the skin loose down the belly and right off the vent. If you have done it right, especially stripping over the sides before you pushed the rat through, you very seldom will the belly tear and drop the insides on the table.



Now take the skin in your left hand and rib cage in the right, pull apart again and you'll strip it right up over the shoulders exposing the front legs. With a little practice you can actually strip this at the same time you strip back to the vent. Hold the rat up by the skin with your left hand, and take your right thumb and push through between the front leg and the skin, the front foot will strip out right at the wrist, no knife needed, repeat with the other front leg.

Grasp the rat on the shoulders with your right hand now, and again pull away from each hand and it will strip right up to the ears. Now you need your knife again. Lay the rat on the table facing you, belly down. With the skin in your left hand, squeeze right at the nose so you are actually pushing the nose out with your left thumb. This will hold the line between the skin and the meat tight; it's always easier to skin anything if it's under tension. Cut through the ear cartilage, keep tension and work your way down over the eyes to the mouth.



Once you cut the corner of the mouth, put the knife down, grasp the carcass with your right hand and give a pull out toward the nose. Now with a quick and light cut on each side of the muzzle you can free the whisker patch on each side, now slide your knife up along the bottom teeth freeing the lower jaw skin, go back up and cut the nose free and you're done. It is easy to just give a yank after you cut through the ears and strip the skin right off the nose, but then you don't have anything to hook over the end of the stretcher.

Scraping and stretching muskrat is the simplest of all fur bearers. You can use a special beam and scraper, but if you use a six inch wide beam for your other fur, it will work just fine for muskrats too. Put the skin on the beam with one side up, so a leg hole is on top. Use the same two handled fleshing knife you do for raccoon, just use the dull edge and scrape lightly. If you left the cheek meat on when you skinned, carefully push it off, this area and under the chin is very weak and will tear easily. Now work down the beam to the front leg. You will see yellow fat in a kind of a semi circle pocket just beyond the leg hole. It will take a little more pressure here, and



the fat will extend down under the red meat, or saddle a little ways. When you have scraped far enough that the yellow fat is gone and the saddle is tight to the skin, quit scraping. If you take the saddle off two things will happen, you will actually scrape "windows" into the pelt, fur will loosen and fall out making your rat a damaged skin, and it also makes a weak skin that doesn't hold up well to handling, greatly increasing the chance of damage down the line, this will cause buyers to back off of what they are willing to pay.

After you have the yellow fat cleaned from behind the leg, there will be some surface fat on top of the saddle that will push off real easily, then continue down to the back edge of the pelt, here you will have another line of fat that is fairly tightly attached at the edge, just push it off the end. Spin the skin on the beam so the other side is up and repeat. You might need to make one more slight turn to get the last little bit.

Putting the muskrat on the stretcher is another simple task, but still needs done correctly. There are many good makes of wire stretchers for muskrats on the market and they are the best way to put up a muskrat, even the Canadian auction houses want you to put rats on wire. Unless you happen to trap an area with a real poor food supply, size on Ohio muskrats isn't much of an issue, most of them are already XL or bigger, wire stretchers don't mat down the fur turning a borderline rat into a flat, and they make a much thinner pelt that handles and bales much easier than one off of a board. To put your rat on the stretcher, simply pull it on with the tail tab on one side and belly tab on the other side. Don't squeeze very hard on the nose of the stretcher, it will already have a pretty good shape. If you do have some kits or some small rats you will need to give a little squeeze, do it just enough to let the skin go on comfortably. With the skin on the stretcher, give a tug on the tail side of the skin then hook the skin. Now, hold some pressure down on the hook and give a little squeeze on the sides just below the shoulders, the hook will slide down a little and you'll feel it bottom out, that's far enough. If the nose won't stay on the end of the stretcher, you can either clothes pin it, or you can run a little wire nail through the nose hole, from the skin side, push the point of the nail up over the end of the wire, roll it around the wire and push it back through the skin. Leaving just a small hole in the bridge of the nose, effectively rolling the nose back up over the wire.

Now, on each wire where the back legs were give a little tug down the wire, this will pick up another 1/2" or more.



All that's left to do now is turn the stretcher over to the belly side and hook it. Slide the hook up almost to the fur and pull the belly skin down to the hook. You're doing this last because the belly skin is so much weaker it tears very easily, this way you put very little pressure on this area while you stretch the skin.

Muskrats can be hung by the nose or tail to dry, it doesn't make any difference. If you have the stretchers with hooks on the bottom you can hang one below the other, hanging two deep gets more rats dry with a lot less space!