

Canine Fur Handling
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This article is going to be on handling canines, and we will go over fox and coyote both since they are similar. This will also be the last of these fur handling articles for now, and Tom Parr is going to help out with the end of it. I don't even have boards for fox or coyote, so Tom is more than happy to give his methods for using boards, and will also cover his method for washing coyotes. I've said it before, if you have a fur that is clean and dry, do not wash it unless you have the proper equipment to get the fur fluffed back up. Well, coyotes are the exception to my way of thinking; they are the one fur we have here that will benefit greatly from washing.

Coyotes are a fur that I call a fooler; it can just look average, but when it's dressed it looks like a whole different fur. The same goes for washing it before you stretch it. The biggest problem with washing fur is you lose so much density if you don't get it completely dried and fluffed back up. Coyotes are such a dense fur that even after washing, the density still seems to be there. That same dense fur also holds an amazing amount of dirt, blood, and just plain grime, and getting this washed out will make the fur feel a whole lot softer instead of heavy and coarse, which is why the washing pays off.

On to skinning. Both fox and coyote have a color line going up the back leg. This is where you're going to cut. Do not make a high cut like you do on raccoon, as you want to leave the lower belly area on a canine. I hang them by the left hind leg to open them up. Hold the right hind foot with your left hand and push the point of your knife in right about the inside of the leg at the Achilles tendon area. The back of the knife should be against the heel with the edge up. With a sharp knife you just slide it up toward the vent area following the color line, and the knife will easily cut the skin from the inside out. (picture 1)

When you come up to the sex organs, guide your knife past them on the belly side; this is one part of the fur that you won't save on a canine. (picture 2) Continue on up the other leg right up to the ankle on the opposite leg.

Now come back to the tail. Hold the end of the tail in your left hand and poke the knife in a few inches down from the base of the tail, again with the back of the knife toward the bone and edge up, sliding under the skin. (picture 3) Cut up toward the vent and go on both sides of it to join your first cut on each side of the sex organs. (picture 4)

Go back up to the leg that's hanging on your chain or rope. You're going to use the same "filleting" motion like you did on your raccoon legs. With your left hand pinch the edge of the incision and start peeling a little of it loose from the bone close to the ankle, then lay your knife in with the side basically laying on the bone and cut up and away. Hold pressure on with your left hand and with just a few swipes you can circle the leg, doing all of your cutting from the inside and never cut tendons or hit the bone with the sharp edge of the knife. (picture 5 or 6 whichever you think is best)

With the skin loose around the ankle, carefully pull the skin down toward the hip; if it's a coyote just pull for all you're worth! You might need to use your knife a little on a coyote as you're coming down the hip. When you get right down to the base of the tail you need to be careful – fox and coyote both tend to tear up over the back as you're pulling over the last little point before the vent. (picture 7) Now work your way around the front and inside of the leg across the lower belly area. Coyote and fox will both pull fairly easily by hand here. Strip the skin loose down the inside of the loose leg, and in the case of a male, cut the tissue from the penis loose right at the skin, leaving the bone on the carcass and not the skin. The pelt no longer has a need for this bone. (picture 8)

Now go to the free hanging leg and cut the skin loose around it just like you did on the leg the animal is hanging

by. Since you have the belly area already skinned off, you can now put the loose leg in the rope or chain with the other one. If the belly wasn't skinned off it would be very difficult to get to with both legs together. With both legs cinched up, pull the remaining leg skin down to the base of the tail just like you did the first one; be careful at the same spots.

Once you're down to the tail, work through under the bone just like you would a raccoon, pull it down to where your incision going up the bone is, then put your tail stripper on and pull the bone out. Be careful on gray fox, as the hairs at the start of the black stripe on top the tail are really coarse and will want to pull through the skin at times. It might take a couple cuts with the knife to get this area started. Once the bone is out, go ahead and split the tail to the tip. Get in this habit of splitting all tails as soon as the bone is out so you don't forget. I make one more cut on coyote before pulling down. I go ahead and split the front leg on the backside up to the elbow; it will make it pop through easier later.

The next step is to pull the skin down to the shoulders, and with fox this is pretty simple. Just get a good hold of the skin of each hip, one in each hand, and pull. Don't use a fox's tail for a hand hold like you do on raccoon or there's a good chance you'll have a tail in your hand that's no longer attached to the rest of the skin. You do need to use a little caution when you start the pulling. Make sure the skin is coming down the belly and not tearing around into the back before pulling hard. Coyotes are a little different story getting pulled down to the shoulder. If they're warm it's a lot easier; they're a tough pull if they're cold. If you can't pull them, try grabbing a handful of skin close to the carcass with your knuckles right at the line where the skin and carcass are tight. Roll your knuckles into the carcass while you push down and it will "punch" the skin down and loosen it from the carcass. Work your way around the coyote repeatedly until you get down over the shoulder. Now that we've gone through that, you can make a simple puller for coyote with a hand cranked boat winch and a couple duck bill vise grips. Anchor the vise grips so that you can clamp the leg skins in them, and hook the winch cable on the legs – either a heavy S hook through the Achilles at the ankles or cinch them together with a choker chain. You'll be surprised how easy they crank out. Even if you only do a few each year it's worth the investment.

When you've got down far enough that the shoulders are exposed, you're going to hit another tight spot. The area over the shoulder blades and back of the neck is the next spot you need to pull on (it's also the loosest spot). By pulling this down you can put more pressure on the chest/brisket area, which is where it's real tight. You can strip this area down by working your fingers under the skin over the back of the shoulders and neck and pulling. On coyotes try pushing the point of your steel in and prying down. (picture 9)

Once this area is pulled down, go to the area between the front legs. You should be able to punch the skin down by rolling your fist in on fox. Coyote are very tight here; this might be hard to imagine, but a hammer comes in real handy here if you can't punch the skin down by hand. Be careful when you do this, holding out on the skin with one hand and hitting the skin right at the carcass line to punch the skin right down between the front legs with the hammer. If you use your knife in this area be very careful, since it's easy to cut the skin here, and even easier to cut blood vessels, and they will bleed a bunch! You might need to work around the shoulder area a little to get it down far enough that you'll be able to poke your steel through between the leg and the skin. With your steel punched through, grab on each side and pull down, stripping the skin down the leg. Fox will strip easily down to the wrist; coyote will open up once you get over the elbow since you already split the skin earlier. After the coyote leg has opened up just cut through it from the skin side just past the elbow. On fox I wring it with the knife from the skin side between the wrist and paw. The skin is thin and just takes a light touch with the knife and it will pop loose. (Picture 10)

Another good pull and you'll be down the neck and over the ears. Skin over the ears a little so you can cut bigger holes in the ears butts – this eliminates a lot of tissue that would need drying, plus gives you finger holes for skinning down the rest of the head. (picture 11)

Skin down over the eyes using the ear holes to hold tension. Canines are predators so they have a forward set eye; you'll find the top or back of the eye as you skin down over the forehead. As you get to the front of the eye stay tight to the skull to keep from getting an enlarged eye hole. (picture 12)

About the same time you get to the front of the eye you'll also be at the back corner of the mouth. You'll need to cut deep on each side of the head now to open the back of the mouth so the lips stay on the pelt. There's a good chance you're going to get some bleeding at this point, but the rest of the skinning only takes a few seconds so it's not much of an issue. Hold pressure with your fingers in the ear holes and cut on each side until you get down to about the canine teeth. You'll have enough of the lips skinned loose now to just cut through the lower jaw skin. Leave it right on the skull. (picture 13)

With the jaw skin loose, a few more touches with the knife will get you down to the nose. Once you're down past the bone and onto cartilage just cut through the cartilage and the skin will be off the carcass. (picture 14)

Time to put the fur on the stretcher. I'm going to go through the way I handle them to stretch on wire and Tom will give you instruction for stretching on boards as well as washing coyotes. With the fur clean and dry, put the fox on the beam. Reds will take very little fleshing, while some grays are fat enough they need scraped clean like a raccoon. Just look at the saddle area. If there's fat under the saddle, scrape the whole thing off. On all canines, start on the head. Scrape the thin red meat off the top of the head and trim it off at the ear butts. The face will turn fur out a whole lot easier with this meat gone. Trim any excess off the ear butts at the same time. (picture 15) On reds there's usually some fat under the part of the saddle right behind the shoulder blades, so scrape the heavy part of the saddle off until the fat is no longer under it and trim any tags of red meat off. (picture 16) Pull the skin up the beam and slide the skin down it with the point up a leg, armpit area up on top the beam. This is another area where fat will go down under the saddle a little ways. Scrape the saddle off until the fat is gone just like you did over the shoulders and do the same for the other leg. (picture 17)

The last place you'll find some fat is in the lower belly area. There are typically a couple pencil size lines of fat here. Also, scrape off any red meat along the back edge that might be there from skinning. As I said earlier, some gray fox might need fleshed completely, while some will be more like the red just described. Coyote are a different story – just plan on scraping them completely. Many coyote are heavy with fat and meat so scraping them clean will do a couple things. A big one is it makes them a whole lot easier to turn. Another thing is it makes the leather seem a lot lighter, making the coyote feel softer, and to me it makes the fur seem better with this soft feel instead of the stiff, board-like feel you get when they're not scraped. The hip area will be down to just membrane and won't want to scrape, so when you get to this point just trim it off at the skin line and leave the membrane on the skin.

Fox will go on a typical wire raccoon stretcher; you'll need to squeeze the nose down a little. Just put one hook at the base of the tail and snug it, flip the stretcher over and hook the legs and pull snug. Don't overstretch the fox; just make it snug. Trim the front legs if needed, just on the foot side of the elbow. (picture 18) Coyotes are stretched on a #6 stretcher; follow the same procedure as the fox. The front leg skins are heavy on coyote and will want to fold down more than a fox will, but you can hold these open by taking a fold of newspaper and rolling it up in a tube, maybe 50% bigger than a toilet paper tube, and putting it in the leg hole. Slide the leg skin out the paper and it will hold it out away from the skin to dry.

After about a day the leather side of the skin will be dry to the touch. You're ready to turn the skin fur out now. The method is the same for all the canines. Unhook the skin and slide it up the stretcher about ½ inch. Fold the nose down and push it through the point of the stretcher so it's on the opposite side, slide the skin up the stretcher until it jams on the skin, and won't slide any higher. (picture 19)

Put your foot inside the stretcher so the base will be pinned to the floor. Hold the fur on the hips with each

hand and fold it up so the fur is out. Start pulling up, making sure the skin is rolling fur out as you pull up toward the nose of the stretcher. In the next picture I stopped right at the head so you can see how the skin is inverting itself as it rolls up the stretcher. (picture 20) Finish pulling until the skin is completely inverted up to the face; normally the stretcher will pop out right before the nose comes through but it's a simple matter to now finish pulling the nose out. (picture 21)

Roll the nose and lip skin so the nose pad is out and slide the skin back on the stretcher. If the skin was fairly dry you don't even need to hook the legs and tail again, but if there is some dampness by all means hook them back up. Leave the leg skin inside, as they can be hard to turn if they are a little too dry. Plus, when they are turned out they can tend to get caught on other skins when being handled and tear. On coyotes that were on the greasy side, or a little damp when you turned them, slide a mink board up in them and turn it on edge so it acts like a spreader and lets more air circulate.

The last thing to do is take a good fur comb and back brush the fur so it stands up while drying. It's just another thing to help give the fur a fuller look.