

## Fleshing and Stretching, raccoon and opossum

You've got your raccoon and opossum skinned and the fur all cleaned and dry. Now it's time to get them fleshed and stretched. We're going to concentrate on the raccoon, and show the few differences related to opossum as we go.

A good knife with two edges is real important for raccoon. There are many on the market that are well made and will do the job just fine, it just takes getting used to the particular knife you have. The inside of the curve of the knife you want to be just a little grabby, not real sharp. This is the edge you will use for the pushing, or scraping off of the fat for the majority of a raccoon pelt, and the whole opossum pelt. I have several different knives, I really like the weight of a knife like the green Sheffield knock off sold by most supply dealers, and the outside curve holds a decent edge, it works good for us in the tannery when we works on real heavy skins. The handles on it will eventually come loose and require drilling and pinning if you want them to stay on. The Post knife you saw in an earlier article on beaver really holds a sharp edge, and I find myself going to it more often. The flattened handles make it real easy to control the blade angle when you're using the sharp edge on greasy coon. I have one of their stock models that are about a handle width shorter and I don't really care for it. Whatever knife you use, put an edge on the outside curve that is sharp enough to skin with. There are a lot of cheap, soft steel knives on the market, if your finances will allow you, spend the extra money on a good knife, you can probably find the Knecker, Post or Sheffield knock off in the \$60.00 to \$80.00 range and they are well worth the investment.

With the raccoon, slide it on the beam belly up. Start up where you cut the lower jaw off when skinning and scrape down between the legs and off the belly. By making a few strips you will have the whole belly to the outside of the legs scraped. If you want to, you can lay the raccoon on the beam with the head down the beam and scrape off the armpit area first; I hit this spot later on. You do need to pay attention to whether you are fleshing a sow or not. Be careful on the sows, especially one that had a late litter. It's easy to catch on a teat, on the late litter sows the skin is exceptionally thin and will tear easily. Lay your knife fairly flat on the beam when you flesh the belly area.



To start fleshing an opossum skin, begin right behind the ears and flesh the back first. There are several things that will make opossum fleshing more successful so to speak. It's easy to flesh an opossum and have big wads of fur come out when you pull it off the beam, that's not a good thing. A skin that is chilled enough to be somewhat stiff will help a bunch, real early opossum can be fleshed "backwards", laying the whole skin on the beam with the head down giving it more cushion because of the double skin and fur layer, and also sliding over the hairs roots instead of catching under them. I just flesh them on the beam in what you could call standard fashion, but you need to lay your knife real flat. The idea is to more or less get behind the fat so it's more like you are sliding the fat off

instead of putting a lot of pressure on the skin and scraping. With a little practice it's pretty easy to get the feel for the right angle and pressure. Flesh all the way down the back with the knife held at this flat angle.

Now turn the raccoon skin about a third of a rotation on the beam. On the raccoon you're going to start getting into the tougher part on the back of the neck. The later into the season the raccoon was taken, the tougher this area will get. By having an edge to start into you can work into this gristle area much easier. Don't put too much time and effort into the tough area; you'll get it later with the sharp edge. Tip your knife up so your edge is bearing down and putting more pressure on than you did on the belly. As you're scraping down toward the tail keep moving toward the spine and you will get past the gristle area and be able to flesh the whole back area fairly easily. On bigger raccoon, don't try and lean way down the beam; you'll pull the skin up in a minute and be able to reach this area easily.



Rotate the skin so you can come in from the other edge and do the same as you just did and you'll meet in the middle.

Now you're ready to clean up the head and shave off the gristle patch. Depending on the way you skinned there may be quite a bit of meat beside each ear, on what would be the upper cheek area. It's important to get this off or you will get a bad odor and possible slippage here. If you didn't cut the ear holes large enough to put your fingers in while skinning, you'll want to cut some of the cartilage off here too. I also always scrape the red meat off the top of the head, many times there is a lot of blood in this area and it needs to go for proper drying.





You have the head cleaned off now, so it's time to put the sharp edge of the knife to work. If you do need to cut some more of the ear butt off it's a simple swipe of the sharp edge now. With the knife laid real flat, start right behind one ear and slice down and away. It takes very little pressure, and a little bit of practice. The idea is to slide sideways slightly as you push down the beam, don't just push straight forward, the skin will pouch and you'll have a hole really quick. On real tough raccoon you might need to take the whole gristle patch, which will be in a V shape, with the sharp edge, on many you'll find that once you get it started behind the ears you can go back to the dull edge and scrape it off.



Pull the skin up the beam and slide a leg hole down over the point with the armpit up. Now you can scrape off any little bit of fat left there and on the bigger raccoon the hips and back legs are now within easy reach. If you do have a heavy string of fat hanging on a back leg, scrape the hip area off first and work your way out to the leg. With too much weight hanging on the belly skin it can tear into the back if you try to scrape it first. Move to the other leg hole and repeat.

Your last move is to scrape the tail. Most of the time you can do this while hooked in a leg hole, if not, just pull the skin up the beam a little more and lean on it to pinch the skin. The upper part of the tail has a lot of fat and needs fleshed to dry properly, the lower part of the tail will benefit from just running the knife down it and squeezing the juice out.





You're finished with the raccoon, let's finish the opossum. You fleshed the back strip on the opossum first, now you're going to work your way around just like you did on the raccoon, only you'll finish on the belly. The reason we do this is to get the weight of the fat off to keep it from tearing the skin. With the rare exception, opossum are short enough that you have fleshed clear off the tail and hips before you work toward the belly. If you do have one that was too big to flesh clear off, slide the skin up the beam and carefully finish the hips and tail base. Try not to let the skin slide on the point of the beam at all or you'll rub the fur right off

the skin creating a window. Turn the skin about a quarter turn, not as much as you would with the raccoon, we're going to flesh the sides off before we get to the belly, again taking off weight from the fat. After both sides are done rotate the skin so it is now belly up. The chest area of real big opossum will have a gristle spot as bad as a raccoon neck, if it does, use your sharp edge for a few quick swipes, on most you can just flesh this area off. Work your way right down over the belly and you're done. On females just flesh beside the pouch on each side, you'll trim the pouch out when you stretch it.



Time to stretch the skins. We're going to do the opossum first and raccoon on wire. Most opossum will fit a standard raccoon stretcher; just squeeze the nose of the stretcher down for small opossum. Squeeze the stretcher together so you're holding both wires together with one hand about half way down the stretcher and slide it up in the skin with the back on one side and belly on the other clear up to the nose. Let the stretcher go while holding the skin by the base of the tail. Hook the base of the tail. Now, with one hand squeeze in on the stretcher in the shoulder area while pulling the hook down with the other hand. Pull with enough tension that when you let loose there's a tight groove up the middle of the back. You'll feel the hook bottom out about this same time; it's something that you just have to get the feel for. Turn the stretcher over and pull both legs around and over the stretcher, hook one tooth in each leg.







Now reach up and squeeze the stretcher in at the shoulders with one hand and pull the leg hook down with the other. This will give you your length and width. Everything to this point is the same for a raccoon and opossum; I also do this while putting the nose of the stretcher against a table or some kind of support while leaning on the base of the stretcher with my belly, that leaves both hands free to work.

For the opossum all that's left is to trim the window and hang it to dry. Just trim the loose skin and leave a window big enough to see the fur.



For raccoon, flip the skin over so the back is up. You'll have a flap of skin hanging on each side, pull this flap around and down the stretcher with one hand, put a clothes pin on with the other, do this on both sides.

I used this same skin for both the board and wire, so it had already been trimmed. If it hadn't, flip the stretcher over again and you'll have two loose hanging flaps below the leg hook to trim, this was actually the belly skin. Trimming the window on a sow will just be a couple small pieces of loose skin above the hook on each leg, on a boar you will also want to trim the penis hole off. You made the bulk of the window when you skinned the raccoon. If your legs are a little long trim them now, if you cut just beyond the elbow when you skinned your length should be good already. Remove the lower jaw skin if it's still there and trim any red meat around the ears, shouldn't be much. The last thing you want to do is trim out some nose cartilage if needed. If you left a lot of cartilage in when you skinned, it will wrap around the wire when it dries and be very hard to get off the stretcher.

If you need to trim it, just push up on the nose with your left index finger, like you're trying to push it up over the stretcher and slice across the nose with your knife, just like you're trying to slice off sections of the nasal passages and the nose will come right up onto the end of the wire instead of wrapping. You're ready to hang and dry.

Now let's put it on a board. The Canadian auctions have standards for board sizes, they have changed and I think are changing again so keep up on it. Many fur handlers use boards for the simple fact that they can way over stretch the skin for a bigger size, and if you can get away with it I guess you're the winner. The pointy nosed boards that make a coon that's eight inches long from the ears to the nose will also make a very thin shoulder area, again, you'll get away with it many times, personally I cringe when they come in the door, you're going to get enough tossed because of weak fur that you won't gain anything over raccoon stretched on the proper board.



Slide the skin on the board and snug down the base of the tail. Put a pin on each side of the tail and bring it in about a quarter of the tail width toward the centerline. If you don't have size lines on your board measure the skin now. If you're close to the next size, pull the nose off the end of the board so it sticks out through the mouth hole of the pelt. Slide your skin down and pin it about a quarter inch below the size line. After you complete pinning the back as described below, put the end of your sharpening steel into the cut end of the nose cartilage and push it up and over the end of the board.

After pinning both sides of the tail, pin each hip working out toward each edge of the board. Each time you put a pin in, go out toward the edge of the board a little and bring the skin in toward the tail, you'll end up with a pleated look and have most of the leg skin actually on the back.



Flip the board over and put a few pins in each leg just to hold them flat.





Next put a few pins up each side of the window, and in the case of this boar, trim the penis off.

Flip the board back over now and you can trim the loose flaps of skin off below each row of pins; this is the same skin you trim below the leg hook on a wire stretcher. Do any needed trimming around the front legs and head now.



Since you have the skin on a board you need to put a belly wedge in or it will tighten down on the board becoming very difficult to remove. Pretty much anything that will go from the opening at the mouth out the window will work. I just slide a mink board up in and leave the end rest on top of a couple of the pins used on the window. You can go to the effort of pinning out the whole tail if you want; it will dry just fine hanging loose on the board and won't make any difference on your grade. The advantage of it is shortening the tail for bagging and handling on the real big coon.



You can see the pleating look on the base of the tail; on lighter raccoon it will make the fur seem denser here. The board you see in the picture is a pretty decent shape on the head/shoulder area, not one of the pointy nose wedge heads I referred to earlier, it gives you pretty much the same shape as a good wire that hasn't been squeezed down too much on the nose. This particular raccoon was a snug 33 inch on the board, ended up the same snug 33 inch on the wire.

Real quick on sizes. Like I said above, sizes seem to change, but, if you stick with XL's at least 7" at the base, up to XXXL's at 8" at the base you're going to be about right. The shoulder width will vary also with the size, but a good rule of thumb is if you have an average size hand you should be able to reach up into the shoulders on XL and up.

In closing, fur is a valuable resource and should be treated as such. We have some members who take a lot of pride in their put up and spend a lot of time at it. When I see it at the sales I appreciate the effort they do put in it, they put up nicer looking fur than I ever have or will! Even if I did have the time, I don't think I'd have the patience.

What I've been expressing to all of you in these articles is how to put up good fur that will pretty much get you as good a grade as you're going to get with as little time invested as possible. We are trying to schedule more fur handling clinics around the state, look in the BT for any others that might be scheduled.