

Raccoon handling (and a bit about possum)

As with everything else, clean and dry is the key. If your coons aren't too muddy put a fan on them and dry them before skinning, if they are a muddy mess, hang them by a front foot and hose them down until they run clear water. If you have access to a tumbler with sawdust you can just skin then wash the pelts. If you have a coon that's nice and dry, don't wash it, without the proper equipment it's very difficult to get the fur fluffed back up and it will seem to be a much lighter furred skin.

Raccoon are the one furbearer we have in Ohio that you will see a big benefit by skinning "assembly line" style. With as many times that you need to pick up a different tool for a different step, and the typical volume you handle, it will pay dividends to do the same step on several at a time.

Since they are bought by the inch, and the different sizes will show a marked price difference in a high market, you want to make your cuts to give yourself the most inches. We skin off choker chains and have three of them hanging, so up to 12 or 15 coons we'll just open them all first. Open them on a bench or table. Lay the coon on its back, head left tail right (reverse everything you read for lefty's) hold the right hind foot with your left hand, poke the point of your knife, 5" straight stiff boning knife just like you used on the muskrat, just under the skin at the ankle, back of the knife toward the leg, edge away so your sliding it under the skin and cutting from under the skin out. Run the knife toward the knee more toward the front of the leg bone than the back, you'll see a line where the fur changes from the longer guard hairs to the mostly short under fur that's inside the leg. Continue this cut to the knee joint. At this point you can cut straight across to the center line of the belly and you will get maximum length. I go ahead and angle the cut up to just behind (tail side) of the pecker on males, same general area of a female. Now turn the coon and make a similar cut on the other leg so the ends of the cuts meet.



For an Opossum don't make the high cut, just cut from the ankle to the base of the tail from each hind foot.

Now turn the coon so the tail is toward you. Grab the tail with your left hand; insert the knife in the tail, edge up again, about one third of the way down from the base, make a cut up beside the vent to join your cut on the belly, make another cut on the other side of the vent and join the belly cut. For an Opossum just make this cut from the hair line on the tail to the cut you made behind the vent. Now you'll have the coon lying on its back with the tail toward you and basically a V shaped flap of skin on each side.

Take the point of the V in your left hand and pull toward yourself and use your knife to basically fillet the skin back toward you, it will only take a few swipes with the knife for each side and the skin will be loose from the inside of the leg to about the back of the hip.



The next part is a little tricky to describe but is pretty simple once you get the hang of it. You're going to grab the leg skin on the outside of the cut that goes to the right foot (your left side) between the knee and the ankle of the coon. Lay the edge of the knife in with the point away from you and the handle toward the coon's foot, now you'll swipe under the skin and, again, basically fillet the skin off the leg bone, working your way around the bone using your left thumb to push under the skin as you go.

Now reach across and do the other leg just like you did the first one, only you'll lay the edge of the knife in with the point toward your left hand and handle toward the coon's foot and use a backhand motion to again fillet the skin off the leg bone working your way around. Use the same motions to skin around the legs of Opossum. All your cuts so far have been from the inside out, not cutting into bone, mud, burrs etc. this is what you want to accomplish as much as possible whenever you skin anything, the knife edge will last a lot longer this way.



Set the knife down, grab a foot with the left hand and the skin that you just cut loose with your right hand, give a good pull apart and you'll strip the skin down over the hip, as long as you get it over the knee you'll be fine.

After you have your coon all opened up, you're ready to start pulling them down. We have three chains so I'm going to hang three at a time. Hold the back feet together and open a loop in the chain so it will work just like the choker on a dog, slide the back feet up through the loop so it's below the ankles. Lower the coon and make sure the chain cinches below the ankles so you can pull without it sliding out. By hanging on both legs together like this you can pull harder without things coming apart so to speak, plus it pulls more evenly. Go down the line and grab each leg skin with both hands and you can strip them right down over the hip exposing the base of the tail.



Now pick up your sharpening steel, push it through between the tail bone and the skin. Grab the point end of the steel with your left hand so you have one hand on each side and pull down and toward yourself, this will strip the skin down over the hip and out the tail to where you made the incision with your knife earlier.

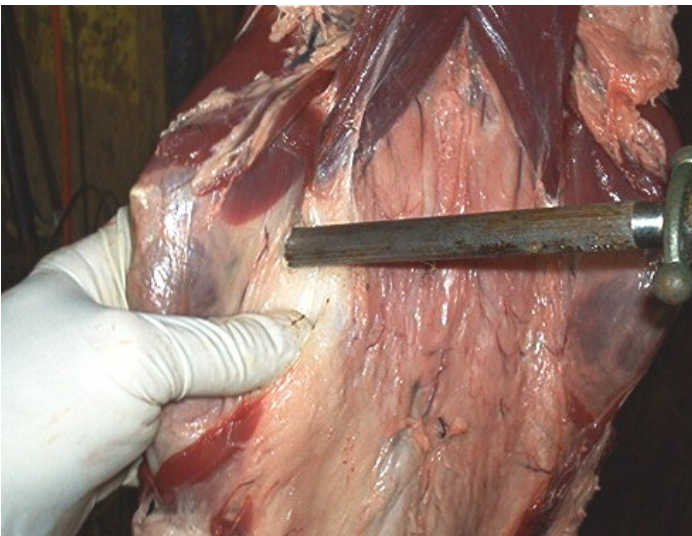




Do the same for all of the coon you have hanging. On Opossum go ahead and cut the skin off at the hair line now.

Put the steel down and pickup the tail stripper, again go down the line and do all. Go down the line again with the tail splitter, if you get in the habit of splitting the tails now you won't have un-split tails rotting on the stretcher later!

Now you're ready to strip them down. Grab a leg skin with each hand and pull, this will start down the sides and belly, you'll need to cut the pecker loose on the males now and pull on the belly skin to start it. Cut the start of the saddle on the back and fat on the sides. This is also where you also need to cut across in front of the sex organs on male possum, or carefully skin the pouch loose on females. Now with one hand make a wrap around it with the tail and grab the rump skin with the other hand, step back and pull! If you aren't big enough to pull, have your coon hanging low enough that you can wrap the skin on your left hand and hold up on the skin while you put your knee on the skin just above the base of the tail. Hold on to the feet at the chain with your other hand in case things come apart, then come down on your knee with most of your weight and the coon will strip down to the shoulders. If you're not big enough for this to work then you'll just have to stand back and pull with your left hand while you carefully knife as needed to skin the coon down over the shoulders. If you got them to pull down you should now be over the shoulders with the elbows starting to show. If you had to knife it down you'll need to push down between the front legs, try holding out on the skin with your left hand and use your fist, end of the steel, hammer handle etc. to push it down.



With the elbows now exposed push the steel through between the leg and skin just like you did with the tail and pull down. It's pretty easy to strip the legs right down to the wrist. You can cut the front legs off before you start and they'll strip right off. Myself, I don't like the sudden lack of pressure when skin the pops off, plus I feel when I hit the bottom so to speak, it actually strips some of the neck down. Do this to all you have hanging, pickup the knife and go down the line and cut off all the legs between the elbows and toenails that are inside the skin.

You're ready to skin the heads now. Another good pull will get most coon pulled down over the head to the ears, it might take a couple touches with the knife. When the ear cartilage is exposed cut through it leaving a hole big enough to put your index finger in one and middle finger in the other, these will be your handles so you can pull while you skin the rest of the head. As you skin over the front of the head keep your knife close to the skull and the eyes will open right up. Stay tight at the front of the eye, it's real close to the bone here, if you don't you'll end up with big eyes. About the time you get past the eyes you'll be at the corner of the mouth, cut deep here and the mouth will open up. Keep pressure on while you cut on both sides of the mouth, the skin on the jaw and bridge of the nose will come along on their own.



As you get to the nose the jaw skin will hang up on the canine teeth, don't try to skin around these teeth, just cut the jaw skin right in front of the end of the jaw and leave it on like the coon has a goatee.

Finish skinning down to the nose, when you are past the bone just cut down through the nose cartilage and you're done.

I was taking the pictures myself while skinning these, so you might need to use your imagination a little, but I think they'll help you visualize the process a little better.

