



How to Keep Wild Game Meat Clean in the Field

One fall 20 years ago, I worked for a wild game processor in Bozeman, Montana. I needed a paycheck and got the benefit of learning to process my own wild game. I learned how to skin, trim, cut, chop, and grind everything from antelope to bison. I also learned that there are infinite ways to ruin wild meat—and that hunters do it all the time. Why disappoint your friends and family with “gamey” meat when you can make killer dishes like venison enchilada meatballs? Proper meat care, it turns out, starts well before you pull the trigger. Take these seven tips with you into the field this fall. You and your taste buds will thank me later.

MAKE THE RIGHT SHOT

Pronghorn have a reputation for not having the tastiest steaks. It's not that they aren't delicious because they are. But hunters tend to take shots at distances beyond their known lethal range when hunting them. Sure, it can happen with any animal, but pronghorn have keen eyesight and love the great wide open. Sneaking to within 300 yards can be a challenge. As a result, I saw many pronghorn carcasses in the meat shop resembling a bloody hunk of Swiss cheese. All those bullets destroy meat, shatter bone, and create bloodshot—the goo that resembles bloody snot and tastes like hell if cooked. The solution to all this is simple. Know your effective range and stick with it.

SHOOT A RELAXED ANIMAL

Remember being scared, really scared? Remember the rush of adrenaline coursing through your body to help you survive whatever that thing was that made you want to run away? You're not alone. The animals we hunt have that, too. Studies have shown that the more an animal is stressed when it dies, the tougher the meat is going to be. Be smooth, slip in quietly and hopefully your quarry will never know you're there until it's too late. By killing a relaxed, calm animal, you're ensuring better meat.

KEEP IT CLEAN

You know not to roll meat around in the dirt and pine needles before bringing it into the processor—at least I hope you do. Don't drag it behind a horse or ATV either. In fact, if you do decide to haul it, get a game cart or even your kid's snow sled. You can always buy another one. A little time spent keeping the meat clean during transport will pay off once you get it home or drop it off. Processors will often charge extra cleaning fees or reject filthy animals altogether if they came in too dirty. Can you blame them? Game bags and old pillowcases also help if quartering in the field.

KEEP IT COOL

When an animal's heart stops beating, the meat starts to break down. It's why we age meat in a cooler or cold garage. In the field, though, you want to slow the aging process. If it gets too warm, above 42 degrees, the meat will start to spoil. If there's snow, lucky you. Skin and pack the quarters in the snow to cool the meat immediately. If there's no snow, skin it, quarter it, pack the meat in game bags, and hang them in nearby trees to get air circulating around it. No time to quarter and hang it before dark? At least field-dress the



Meat extraction isn't rocket science. Use whatever you have at hand to haul out the animal to keep it clean. A sled and some snow keeps meat cool and clean.



An old bike trailer built to haul kids will just as easily haul meat.

animal and prop open the rib cage. To get air circulating underneath it, roll it onto some logs. Whatever you do, don't leave it flat on the ground overnight, which is a recipe for spoilage.

PREDATOR CONTROL

If you need to leave your animal out overnight, you want to protect it from scavengers that will be more than happy to nibble, gnaw, and poop on your meal. Bears and lions will drag off entire carcasses and bury them for future consumption. To prevent this, you want to make the area as uninviting as possible, which means making it smell like you. Drink the rest of your coffee and pee around the area. Take that nasty, sweat-soaked thermal top you've worn for three days and hang it close to the meat. If you can't hang the quarters in game bags, drape some pine boughs on top of the carcass so the ravens don't swoop and poop. If you can, drag the guts as far away from the meat as you can—or vice versa—the hope being whatever is out there will dine on the offal and not the hindquarters.

KEEP THE FLIES OUT

Flies, meat bees, and yellow jackets love venison as much as we do. If you hunt where these pesky insects live, then you

know the pain of trying to break down an animal while being swarmed. Spray the meat with a 50/50 vinegar/water solution. The Alaska Department of Fish and Game recommends spraying the meat with a citric acid solution. They suggest two ounces of citric acid to every quart of water. Spray the meat until the solution starts dripping off. The mixture will create a dark crust on the meat to help prevent flies from laying eggs. Got game bags? Then, use them.

HAVE AN EXTRACTION PLAN

Elk are big animals. And if you're a few miles from the truck, you better know how you're going to get all that meat out. Quartering and packing it out is incredibly handy over rough and steep terrain. Have some buddies on speed dial or make arrangements with a local packer if you know the weather will be warmer than 50 degrees during the day. If you're near a closed road, use a game cart. I like to use an old bike trailer made for hauling youngins, which I found in someone's trash pile. It works much better than it looks and has hauled the meat those kids love to eat.



The author with a magnificently clean elk hind quarter.

Keeping wild game clean and cool in the field isn't hard. You just have to plan ahead and have the right tools. You worked hard to find that freezer full of meat. You owe it to yourself and to the animal you killed to make the most out of that gift that will provide plenty of meals and memories for the year ahead. ■