



THE FUN AND GAMES OF MEAT EXTRACTION

We've all heard the phrase before. "It's all fun and games until someone gets hurt." On a do-it-yourself (DIY) hunt, it needs just a slight edit to, "It's all fun and games until an animal hits the ground." The moment a mature elk, big-bodied mule deer or brawny, North Country whitetail falls miles from vehicle access, it's time to put your big boy (or girl) pants on. When you find yourself in this predicament solo, those pants better be filled by a grown-up with meat extraction experience.

COLE KAYSER, MARK'S SON, IS READY TO PACK OUT HIS SECOND DIY, PUBLIC-LAND BULL, AFTER BEING PREPARED WITH THE RIGHT GEAR AND MINDSET.





Elk are grand animals to hunt, but once you find success the real work begins.

Of course, you need to acquire experience somewhere. To be prepared for that first extraction or to fine tune your fiftieth, homework is advised. Going up against hostile terrain, a dead-weight opponent and utter exhaustion with just a knife, daypack and a couple of Hefty bags, does not make for a good ending.

The first couple of whitetails I shot on the opposite side of a river with no vehicle access brought me up to speed on labor-saving meat removal steps back before the twenty-first century. My “average” male stature and South Dakota’s prairie gumbo, combined with steep banks, nixed any dragging options. The only way to get a buck from one side of the river to the other was in pieces.

Fast forward to 2020 when I was starting at my sixth DIY, public-land bull in as many years while solo archery hunting. More than two decades earlier, the sight of a bull laying on its side caused near panic attacks. Those days have since passed. Today it is more akin to looking at a trailer load of square hay bales on a 90-degree day. It is not rocket science. You merely roll up your sleeves and power through the chore.

You may ask why I typically hunt solo. I guarantee you it is not because I do not have friends. Facebook says I do. It is because oftentimes my friends are not in the shape needed to pull off a hunt in extreme topography, plus they do not have the time for extended hunts.

I typically start out with a buddy in camp, but by day four they have flown the



coop because of fatigue or work duties. Whether you hunt solo or with a group, you still need to understand the basics for meat extraction when hunting without the assistance of an outfitter. Being prepared guarantees that your meat stays fresh, and that starts with having the right gear.

LEARN UP, GEAR UP

When I hunt the Midwest or Great Plains for deer, I assume I can get a vehicle close with only a short drag. Never assume that on a DIY hunt on public land in the West. You will need gear to bring meat out and leave most of the carcass at the butcher site. First, ditch the daypack. A compartment style backpack designed for backcountry hauling works best—think 3,500- to 4,000-cubic inch capacity. Ideally, you have a pack with a fold-out shelf to accommodate quarters.

Success on a DIY, public-land hunt is all celebration until the real work of an extraction starts.

Why go big with a pack? First, once you kill an animal you never want to hike out without your pack filled. Elk take four to five loads for extraction. Why waste boot leather without a full load outbound? Second, a larger pack ensures you can stow survival items—first-aid, rain gear, water and other needs. Try that with a small daypack.

At the kill site, you will need at least two pairs of latex gloves—one for meat duties and a second for head and vertebrae work if you want a trophy mount. Because of chronic wasting disease and its prevalence in brain and spinal tissue, make sure you don't use the same pair of gloves for meat care. Bring along two medium-sized knives, plus a lightweight

sharpener. One knife should be reserved for meat care and another for head removal. Forget a saw; it's dead weight, and your knife works easily to slice around joints to disconnect them.

As you pull quarters and meat off the carcass, have at least four meat bags ready for packing. Made of lightweight, airy material, these bags help cool meat and protect it from environmental contaminants such as insects and dirt. Pack several garbage bags along. I use one as a pack liner to contain blood and another to wrap the skull, both to minimize blood stains and cleanup. I use a third to lay out all my gear for organization during the chaos of meat removal.

As a backcountry precaution, I always pack at least two light sources and extra batteries. You have a 50/50 chance of doing your handiwork in the dark. A hunting app like onX or a GPS device helps you navigate easily once you are loaded down. And it never hurts to have a length of paracord in your pack to tie up a leg during butchering.

On one particularly steep slope, I forgot to secure a bull I shot. After removing all the meat on one side, I flipped it over, and then it suddenly took off down the slope like an unmanned bobsled. When it got caught up in the sagebrush right before disappearing in a tangle of deadfall, I lashed him down tighter than ship containers on a cross-Atlantic trip.

BREAK IT DOWN

Before you head to the hills, it's time for a little screen time. Search online for videos on how to butcher an animal in the field. Familiarize yourself with the "gutless" method for

elk, how to quarter an animal, and how to debone it. Why debone it? Less weight—it's that simple.

After deboning, you'll typically be left with around 35 percent of an animal's live weight. Check state game regulations, but in many Western states you only have to pack the meat from the four quarters, backstraps, and inside loins. Neck, rib and flank meat may not be required, but it makes great burgers and sausage.

Naturally, your end result varies depending on the size and sex of the animal, but here are a few generic numbers to ponder. The average deboned buck results in approximately 60 pounds of meat in your pack. The average doe loads you down with approximately 45 pounds. The real test arrives after deboning an elk. With a bull you easily end the deboning task with 250 pounds or more of meat. A big cow tallies a minimum of 100 pounds.

Do not overlook the weight of a skull or cape if you plan on packing that out. Any deer could easily add up to 30 pounds for the skull and antlers alone. An elk skull with antlers attached is another 40 pounds or more of weight to haul off the mountain. Capes add even more. A deer cape could exceed 20 pounds and an elk cape could add 30 to 40 pounds.

Hopefully, I have convinced you to bone out your animal if you need to pack it. As to the "gutless" method, I remove the guts from a deer but don't be afraid to practice butchering with the guts in. At some point, you'll need that knowledge when you stare down an elk carcass.

The gutless method on elk is relatively easy once you know what you're doing—that's where the videos come in handy. As you skin the hide back, lay the removed portion down to act as a mat. You can set meat parcels on it or lay



BY BEING PREPARED AND STUDYING HOW TO EXTRACT MEAT BEFOREHAND, A DIY HUNT CAN BE COMPLETED WITH SWEAT EQUITY.

Even with a partner, the extraction of a bull is a lot of work and requires experience, and the right gear.



your knife down on the lighter backdrop to find it easily.

What chunk of meat you remove first is optional, but it can depend on how the animal dies. When alone, you simply attack the first area visible after skinning. There is no need to remove quarters unless you find it easier. Here is a very quick review.

After skinning, the front quarters are removed easily as you push the leg up and away from the body. Cut away connecting meat, and it easily comes off. The rear quarters demand you locate the ham. With a sharp knife, slice down along the pelvis attached to the ham. Continue cutting deeper until you expose the ball joint where the rear quarter connects to the pelvis. Carefully cut around the ball and slice the tendon that extends into the joint. Once the ball is separated, filet the remaining meat away from the pelvis to move the rear quarter.

Whether quarters are on or off, slice laterally down each of the four quarters and begin fileting off muscle groups. Large chunks are best for packing and later packaging choice cuts. Have your game bags handy to deposit

each meat chunk as it is removed from the carcass to maintain cleanliness.

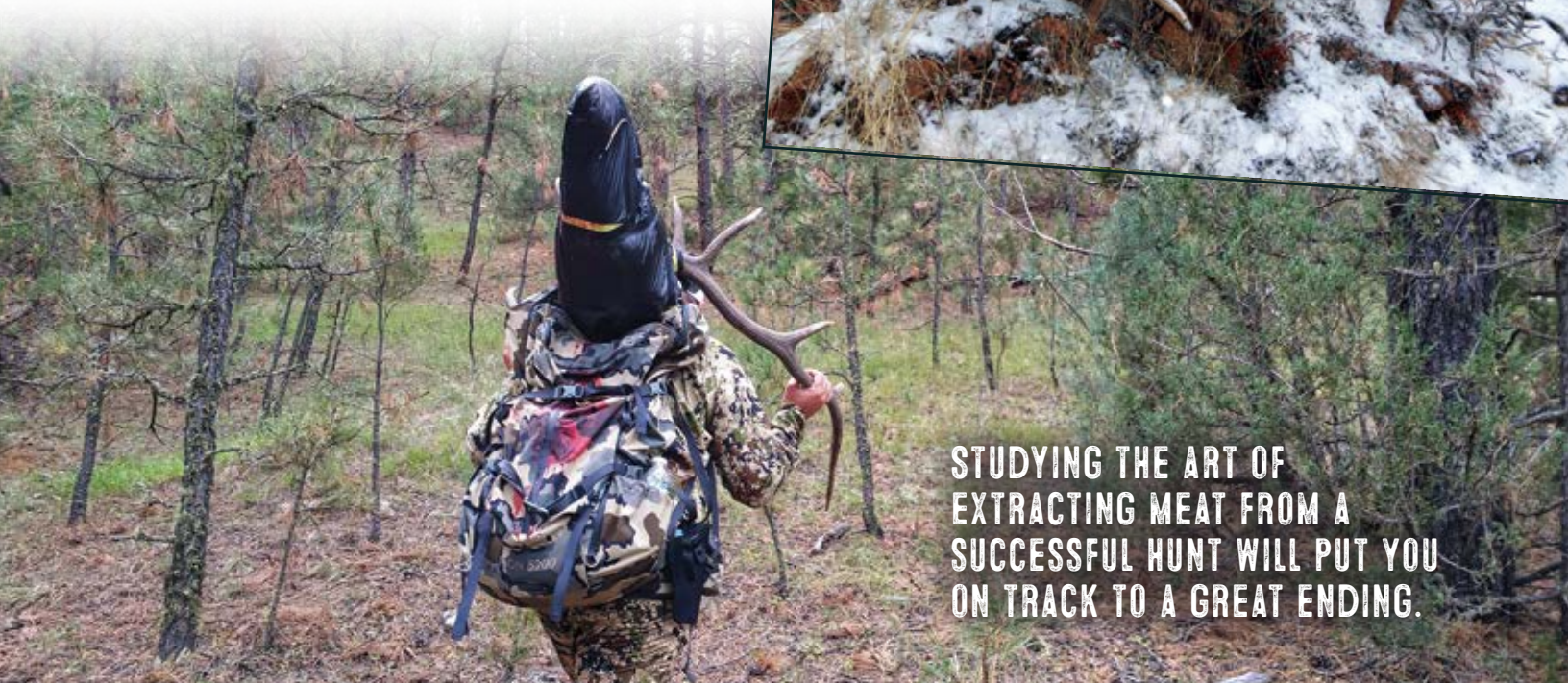
Now it is time to remove the good stuff: backstraps. Slice from the front quarter to the rear quarter all along the upper vertebrae. Repeat the process—only this time perpendicular to the spine—on the shelf created by the side vertebrae bones and the top of the ribs. These cuts release the hold on the backstrap and with an extra slice here and there you can lift the backstrap off.

By now, you are close to complete, but one major challenge remains: the tenderloins. Just ahead of the rear quarter on the elk, make an incision from the rear quarter to where the ribs begin below the vertebrae. Be careful not to nick the gut. Reach in. Against the backbone you will see (or feel) the inside tenderloin, one on each side. Carefully push down on the gut to filet the loins away from the vertebrae pocket. Add them to a game bag and be sure to cherish them later.

Flip the deer or elk and repeat the steps on the opposite side. At



ABOVE: Levi Duncan, the author's hunting partner, smiles over the backstraps from his DIY bull taken on public land. BELOW: With the deboning process complete, the author stashed meat bags and the elk rack in a rock pile as he packed out his first load during this 2019 hunt.



STUDYING THE ART OF EXTRACTING MEAT FROM A SUCCESSFUL HUNT WILL PUT YOU ON TRACK TO A GREAT ENDING.

the end, slice away any neck, rib or flank meat you desire or the law requires. When detaching the head, swap out your knife and put on a new pair of gloves for CWD precautions. Load your pack with weight matching your physical fitness level and take it slow.

A MEATY ENDING

When you reach a trailhead, either put meat in iced coolers or hang in a shady, cool area. On several occasions I have built scaffolding over mountain creeks to allow meat to cool via the icy currents below. It is best not to submerge meat in cold water. Instead,

keep meat clean, dry, and cold for the best results.

After taking a few ibuprofen and looking up the nearest masseuse for a back massage, I then decide on whether to process it myself or let the pros handle it. With my busy schedule, I often resort to letting the pros process my meat. Either way, you may want to allow your meat to age in a controlled environment. Aging is best in temperatures from 32 to 40 degrees from 7 to 20 days.

With some careful preparation, the meat that caused you a backache in the fall can repay itself with delicacies for months. ■



Mark Kayser celebrates a successful hunt and meat extraction after a grueling DIY hunt, solo on public land.

Although a DIY extraction is hard work, the reward is great at the end of a hard job.

GEAR

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A BACKPACK FOR ALL OCCASIONS

Regardless if I am elk hunting, whitetail hunting or calling coyotes, I follow the credo that bigger is better for backpacks. Daypacks simply never can accommodate my loads that include everything from clothing layers to calls, lunch and decoys. Plus, if you are going into the backcountry, you may need to live out of it or even survive a tragedy with the gear inside. Of course, there is always the temptation to take too much with a bigger pack, but you only do that once after learning from an exhaustive outing.

Selecting a large pack often greets you with prices that shock, especially in the inflation, post-pandemic world of today. I recently put the mid-priced Commander X + Pack from ALPS OutdoorZ through a season of hunting. I did not acquire the pack until after elk season, but it did follow me through several deer hunts, coyote hunts and a boot wear-out season of hunting shed elk antlers.

ALPS OUTDOORZ



If you have any DIY hunts you would like to see featured in the column, please email Karlie Slayer, Karlie@Boone-Crockett.org for details.