

from the book *Buckskin: The Ancient Art of Braintanning*
by Steven Edholm and Tamara Wilder
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FLESHING

Fleshing is removing from the skin all meat and fat, as well as the more obvious and loose parts of the membrane (hypodermis). Some tanners remove most of the membrane during fleshing, by using a sharper tool and spending more time on this step. Our preference is to scrape off the easy stuff (mostly literal flesh, fat, and blood) with a duller tool and then remove what's left of the membrane in a later step, after the skin has dried once.

Soak fresh hides for ten or fifteen minutes before fleshing. This soaking loosens up the tissues and washes out some of the blood and dirt. One can, however, flesh a fresh skin easily enough without soaking. If the skin is at all dried out, dry in spots, or completely dried, then soaking is definitely in order. If the skin is dried out in only a few spots, soaking will be quick and easy; a little pulling and stretching in a bucket will suffice. If the skin is totally dried out, it will take more time and effort, involving periodic stretching until the skin is completely floppy and saturated. The bottom line is that skins should be wet and pliable for the fleshing process.

Once the skin is well saturated, and before you actually begin fleshing, rinse it in a few more changes of water to remove the majority of blood and dirt. Wear an apron or tie a plastic bag around your waist when fleshing (unless you're totally into blood and gore).

Start scraping at the neck and work towards the tail. The various areas of the skin will yield varying amounts of meat, fat, and membrane, depending on both how the deer was skinned

and on the individual skin. Some parts may yield nothing. Remove only obvious meat, fat, and tissue that comes off easily. Of course, that's our "easily". It probably won't seem easy to you the first time.

Try to get a front of tissue going across the hide and advance it a little at a time. Flesh over the entire skin.

Some things that you may see on the skin while fleshing are score marks, vein tracks, and blood stains. If the hide was poorly skinned, you will now be exposing the ugly reality of score *marks* (lines and/or holes cut into the skin). *Vein tracks* are normal and look very different than scores. They are usually not very deep and have an organic looking branching character. You can't scrape score marks and vein tracks out, so don't try.

Blood stains are obvious enough as to not need any description. They occur most often around wounds, which most dead animals have. Scrape extra hard and thoroughly over blood stains during fleshing, to press out as much of the blood as possible. Not all of the blood will come out, but it is good to "scud" out as much as you can before the skin is dried. Fleshing a skin fresh, followed up by soaking in many changes of cold water, will help to prevent blood from permanently staining the skin.

Once the skin is completely fleshed over, rinse it out in clean water a couple of times before proceeding with soaking.

Fleshing could be considered kind of gross and undoubtedly is if the hide is rotten. Rotten hides aside, fleshing can be kind of fun and satisfying, since you can see the results of your efforts as large globs of undesirable carnage slide away under your omnipotent tanning blade.

SUMMARY OF FLESHING

- The skin should be wet and pliable when fleshing commences.
- Remove only the more obvious meat, fat, and tissue. What's left of the membrane will be removed in a later step.
- Try to "scud" the blood out of any blood stains by scraping over them repeatedly and hard.
- Rinse the skin more or less clean before proceeding with the next step, soaking.



Fleshing a not-so-fleshy skin.