

# Field Dressing a deer

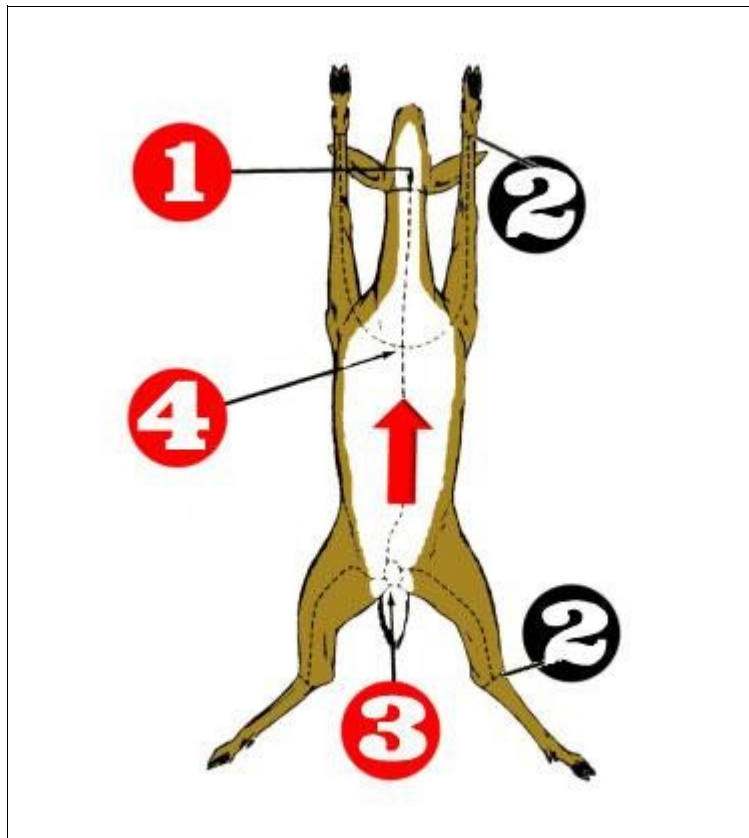
Good article on Field dressing by Garry Benton

The wind was light, but the air was cold as I walked from my tree stand to where I had hit the big buck with an arrow. I saw the arrow go through the animal's body and knew it was a good solid hit the minute I released. Most bow hunters have the feel of a good shot or of a bad one, you just know if the arrow was released properly and you know if your form was good as well. In this case, I knew I would soon have meat on the table.

I had stayed in my stand for about thirty minutes after making my shot to allow the animal to bleed a bit and to stiffen up. I knew from experience the animal would not go very far, unless pursued. I had learned a long time ago that a hurt animal would, in most cases, simply find a place to bed down, so I had relaxed and waited. I have seen many hunters pursue deer for miles and wonder how the animal could keep moving, but never underestimate the power of adrenaline.

My arrow was found near the spot where the deer had been standing when I released it. It had passed through the deer and was stuck in the ground. The shaft was covered in blood and there was a blood trail, as well as clear tracks, leading toward a cluster of trees about fifty yards away. I notched another arrow and slowly followed the tracks and blood trail. I didn't have to go very far into the trees when I saw the deer lying near a large pine. I approached the downed animal from the rear and was ready to take another shot if need be (even an injured deer can be dangerous to an unprepared hunter). Never assume your deer, even if it is down and on the ground, is safe to approach. If you approach from the rear the deer will hear you and if possible it will raise its head to look in your direction, it may even attempt to stand. In either case, you will have enough time to place another arrow or bullet into the animal for safeties sake. The deer I had hit on this hunt was dead.

I quickly prepared the deer tag as required by my state and placed it on the bucks rack. I tied in on the lower part of the rack so it would not slide off when I transported the deer back to camp. The exciting part of the hunt was over, now came the work. I moved the deer so its head was uphill slightly and then cut its throat, see illustration step 1. (I have heard different arguments about the importance or need of this step, both pro and con, but old habits are hard to break).



Before I started field dressing the animal, I removed one of my one quart canteens (I always carry two) and unscrewed the lid. I also pulled an old bath towel from my fanny pack and placed it down beside my water. Reaching deeper in my back I pulled out a poncho and some nylon cord (550 cord from a parachute is what I usually carry). I made sure all of my gear was out and ready for use before I did anything else. I hate to look for something in my pack when my hands are covered with blood. Some folks may want to use patient examination gloves like a doctor uses, but I don't. There are also latex gloves that can be used (they don't leave a residue on the meat) or the surgical gloves. Rubber gloves are strongly recommended by the Center for Disease Control in areas with endemic chronic wasting disease (CWD). I don't like the feel of gloves when I field dress game (and CWD is not a hazard in my area), so I prefer not to wear them. If you are unsure if CWD is a problem in your area, contact your local fish and game agency. Just be sure to follow any safety suggestions from your state agency to avoid illness.

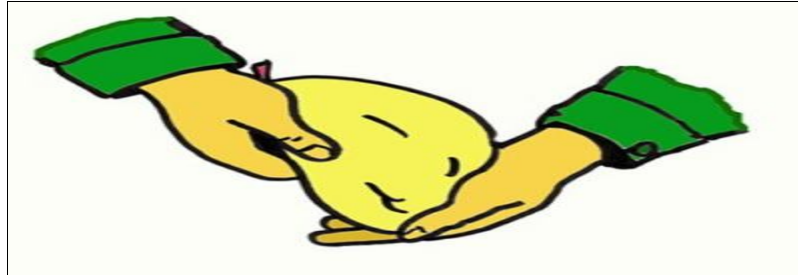
If the weather had been very cold I would have made a fire and got comfortable as I field dressed the animal, but there was no need that morning. I have found in cold weather the animal is harder to work because it starts to first stiffen and then freeze in the cold. And, I usually do my field dressing with a very small skinning knife. Those "Rambo" blades may look good, but they are hardly practical for field dressing large game. I want to be able to "feel the blade" as I use it and know I am not cutting a major organ or contaminating the meat. A small knife works just fine for me. And, keep the knife sharp.

I started by making a circular cut completely around an area just above four knee joints, see illustration step 2. Then, at the sex organs, I circled them with the knife blade and removed them, see illustration step 3. While I was in that area of the buck, I also made a deep circular cut around the rectum (using caution not to cut through the intestines or making any punctures of the rectum). I pulled, and many of you may disagree with this step, the rectum out and tied it tightly closed with a piece of my nylon cord. I think this step prevents leakage or making a nasty mess where I am working dressing my game.

Finally, I was ready to open the deer up, see illustration step 4. I made a very small cut just above where the reproductive organs had been. I inserted two fingers (index and middle finger) inside the slit and opened them fully. Next, I placed my knife blade, edge up, cautiously between the two extended fingers. I used the fingers to assist in pulling the animal's skin and flesh up as I slowly ran my knife blade up to the rib cage. Additionally, using the two fingers method allows me to feel the inner organs and avoid cutting or puncturing them. I always use caution not to accidentally open (cut or puncture) any internal organs (stomach, intestines, bladder, or other organs) as I gut the animal.



Once the cavity was open, I removed the bladder (which is a yellowish color) and made sure not to let any urine fall on the meat (I keep my canteen there to quickly wash off any spilled urine and the towel to dry it immediately). As soon as it was removed, I discarded it away from where I was doing the field dressing. At this point I simply reached inside of the open cavity and pulled the rectum out, but did not remove it completely yet.



I rolled the buck on its left side and carefully cut the thin whitish tissue that holds the inner organs in place (it always reminds me of a sack) in the rib cage. I repeated the process after I rolled the buck over on its right side. Now came a messy step, I reached in and made sure the white tissue had been cut all the way around the organs and intestines. I removed the heart and liver (placed them on the towel) and carefully rolled the inner organs from the open cavity. My last step was to enlarge the cut at the throat so I could get to the windpipe. I had initially severed it high and now I ran my knife blade around and under it as far down as I could go. Once that step was completed, I reached deeply inside the animal's rib cage, made a few cuts along the sides and back of the windpipe, and removed it.

Now, while you may suspect I was finished, I was not. I picked up the animal's liver and evaluated it for discoloration. It should have an even dark red color and it was. **Any liver or internal organ that has white or red blister like sores should be considered unhealthy and you need to contact your state so a veterinarian can examine it. Make sure you tell the official the liver or organ had lesions on it.** If the liver had been discolored when I first saw it, I would have stopped field dressing immediately at that point. Additionally, it is a good idea to give all the organs (liver, kidneys, lungs, etc) a close examination as you field dress the animal. Many states will reissue you a new deer tag if you down an unhealthy deer and report it, if the vet determines the animal was in fact sickly.

My last step was to roll the deer onto my poncho (a military surplus item that is approximately 57 inches by 88 inches) and cover it well with the material. I used the remainder of my nylon cord to wrap the animal up securely in the poncho. I left the head uncovered by the poncho, but tied a large international orange trash bag to the antlers for safety reasons. There are also commercial game bags that can do the same job as my poncho and can be washed and reused, the choice is yours. Since all I had to do was drag the deer to an old logging road and then back to camp, I could use the horns as a hand grip, but didn't want someone to shoot at me (the reason for the orange trash bag). Also, I always drag my deer and not loop them over my shoulders like you see in the movies. I feel carrying a deer on your shoulders is just asking to get shot by some fellow hunter who may know very little about hunting safety. Even when wearing an international orange hat and vest, keep safety in mind at all times. You want to be identified immediately as a hunter and not as wild game. Before heading back to camp, I used soap I had packed in and water to clean my hands well.

I returned to the camp earlier than the other hunters and with the meat on my buck clean of dirt and debris. I don't usually skin a deer until I return to camp, unless it is really cold and then I have no choice. If the temperature drops the animal will be harder to skin later because it will freeze. Or, unless I am way back in the bush and have to pack the meat out, then I will gut, skin, and usually de-bone the animal so I don't have to carry the extra weight.

The night before we had suspended a pulley from a very large limb in the shade of an old oak tree, so I hoisted my deer head down onto the pulley. Now, some folks may prefer to hang the deer head up, but I don't think it matters much, as long as any blood and fluids can drip out. I used a gambrel (it sort of looks like a steel coat hanger with upturned hooks on each end) to hook through the hind legs near. I also cut a small green limb and placed it across the open abdominal cavity I had made during the gutting process to hold it all open (This step allows the meat to cool).

The final step before butchering is to skin the deer, but skinning is a simple process of pulling away the hide from the flesh, and doesn't deserve much discussion. Simply work from the hind legs, using a sharp thin knife to free the hide in places where it clings to the underlying flesh. Skinning is usually a snap.

A deer hunt can be a lot of fun. But to field dress, skin, and process the meat of your downed animal can take a good deal of time to do properly. To me, the most important aspect of field dressing a deer is not rushing the job and making sure no internal organs are accidentally cut open. Some organs, such as the stomach or bladder can "taint" the flesh as they say back home, or in other words spill their contents on your meat. While the meat can be washed off, it is unappetizing for me to have to do so. Take your time, use caution while dressing your deer, and enjoy your success. After all, you earned it!