

Brain Tan Deer and Elk Skins

To tan your deer or elk skins the traditional Indian way takes hard work and patience.

The Indians have used the brain tanning method for centuries. It has proven to be one of the best for withstanding the elements. To tan the skin they used the brain and tallow (fat) of the animal they killed for food, wasting nothing that could be used for their survival.

To begin the tanning process, carefully skin the animal without cutting even the smallest knife holes in the skin. A little hole can become large during tanning.

Flesh and wash the hide until all blood, membrane and fat have been cleaned from the skin.

The simplest way to flesh a hide is to stretch it across a peeled log, or cover a wooden sawhorse with some padding and stretch the hide, then begin scraping and trimming every inch.

After you have scraped and cleaned the flesh side of the animal, fill a large tub or container with cold clean water. Be sure you have enough water to cover the hide and then some. Next mix one cup of wood ashes with two cups of cold water. Stir it up well, then stir the ash mixture into the tub of cold water. Place the hide in the tub of lye-ash water and let it soak in the tub until the hair begins to come out with a slight tug. Stir the contents of the tub a few times and leave the hide in the water a while longer, until you can scrape a blunt scraping tool gently across the skin a few times and remove a strip of hair. At this point you will be able to scrape all the hair off.

If you find it difficult to deal with the odour, you can change the lye-ash water several times, but it will slow down the hair slipping process.

When the hair has reached the slipping stage, stretch the hide across the log again, hair side up, and begin scraping the hair off.

Next, in a small pot, place the brain of the animal along with two cups of fat or tallow and simmer until you can mix it together, making a paste.

Once the paste has cooled, and you have removed all the hair from the hide, rub the brain paste into the hide, covering the entire skin and rub it in well. Let the hide rest, soaking up the paste and becoming dry to the touch.

After the hide has dried up all the brain paste, pull the hide across a wooden sawhorse or peeled limb of a tree to soften. When you have made it as soft as possible by pulling, then add the finished softener by scraping the hide gently with a clean sandstone.

Sometimes the Indian would smoke the hide for color as well as to preserve it. Smoking also hid their scent from larger game animals, and it was said to keep the snake from the path. Snakes can detect the smoke. The best way to smoke the skin is with a very small green wood fire that has lots of coals. Hang the skin several feet above the fire and channel the smoke to it.