

## Tips for a Great Tan

by Hilary Laurer

This winter I cleaned out our freezers. These are not normal people's freezers, these are Tracker freezers. We have two at the farm in which we store hides, legs and various other useful parts. I wanted to tan some hides and found 14 unclaimed deer hides under ice.

This winter I did quite a bit of hide tanning and have a few tips and tricks to pass on. The first task I faced was to flesh all the hides (remember fleshing is pushing, not cutting, the meat and fat off the skin). I also wanted the hair to slip (falloff), so I asked Tom what he thought the fastest method to do that was. His favourite is to soak the hides in warm soapy water, so that is what I did. Remember, plain water will do, soap just speeds it up, and warm water even more so, especially in the winter. I found the hides that slipped best were those that soaked either while unfleshed or with unfleshed hides because of the extra blood and meat that boosted the bacteria population hastening hide breakdown and hair slippage. Careful! Check your hides often so you do not over soak them (they can rot quickly).

After a few days of hard work and the help of Walter G. who was a helper at the December philosophy classes (thanks again Walt), we had the 14 hides fleshed, but only half of them slipped well. While out checking the hides I noticed a newcomer, a nice big deer hide hanging nearby. I admired it and felt the hair for slippage, and out came handfuls of hair - it totally slipped. I enviously asked Caretaker Dan, who owned the hide, "how did you get it to slip so well?" He said he peed on it because he had heard urine removes grease, then he staked the hide out on the ground for two days. And actually, he said he did not want the hair to fall off and that he had planned to tan it hair on. I have not tried the urine method, but it was the best slipped-hide I have ever seen, so try it out if it fits your style. The bottom line though is camouflage your intent, because those hides you want to tan hair off will not slip, and those hides you plan to tan hair on will easily lose their hair! Go figure!

When I soften a hide after braining it, I prefer to work by hand instead of retying the hide to a rack. That way, if I get tired after a few hours I can put the hide into a plastic bag and refrigerate it until I can finish it the next day. Careful though, the last couple of hides I did were somewhat stiff and needed to be re-brained. What they taught me was I needed to be more aggressive during the softening process. The hides need very active stretching until completely dry. Try stretching the hide in all directions both over a smooth, rounded stake (like a shovel handle) that is secured in a vice or in the ground, and buffing and stretching the hide around a tightly tied rope or cable.

Finally, for smoking the hide I learned a slick trick from a video on how the Cree Indians in Quebec tanned hides. They sew the hide into a tube (or sew two hides together), sew on a skirt along the bottom to keep the hide further from the heat and hang it. Instead of using coals to create smoke they heat a softball sized rock in the fire for about an hour, put it into a pot (I used a stew pot) on a bed of dry, punky, rotten wood, then they cover the rock with more punky wood. They secure the skirt around the pot and they are off and smoking. It works great! While smoking, never leave the hide because a flare up of flames can ruin the hide. Using a rock controls the smouldering wood better than coals, hence, fewer flare-ups. I smoked two pairs of

hides, one for 45 minutes, the other thinner pair 30 minutes per side. They turned out beautifully. That definitely is my preferred method of smoking (you can smoke a rock, Bryan).

The last thing I want to mention is there is a fantastic new book out on brain tanning, the best and most comprehensive I have seen, "Wet Scrapped Braintanned Buckskin" by Steven Edholm and Tamara Wilder. It talks more about wet scraping (we teach dry scraping in the standard) but they are similar processes. The book discusses both and all other aspects of brain tanning very thoroughly.

Happy tanning!