

Have You Got The Brains?

By James Watson, *Native Awareness*

“There are enough brains in every critter to tan its own hide... apart from a few humans that I know!”

I remember well, my first experience with the process of hide tanning. It was dusk on a beautiful summers evening, many years ago. I was driving along in my car, with a young lady friend, on the way back from the cinema when I received a phone call. “James, it’s Quentin, I’ve a road kill deer... it’s still warm! Hurry!” I hung up and turned to my friend, smiling coyly, thinking, “How on earth am I going to explain this one?”

The handsome young male roe deer hadn’t a mark on it and after Quentin and I had paid our individual respect and thanks to the deer, we went to work. I held a torch whilst Q skilfully started skinning. After the initial few cuts, the skin was peeled off like a glove, revealing the beauty of its muscle structure and sinews. This was the first time I had witnessed this process and I will never forget it. The simplicity of only needing to use fingers and fist to ease the skin away from the flesh really impressed me. I will always remember that summers evening, due mainly to the respect my friend had given the animal, and how he continually talked to the deer whilst skinning and butchering it.

When I teach traditional tanning, students are amazed at how involved and labour intensive the process is and just how many calories you burn off! I like to think of it as a form of primitive keep fit, an aerobic exercise but without the Lycra. You get to create some beautiful buckskin clothes from your efforts, which is much more satisfying than going down the gym!

There are many great books on the subject, I highly recommend Matt Richards, ‘Deerskin into Buckskin’ and Jim Riggs, ‘Blue Mountain Buckskin’. In this issue we will cover an overview of the wet scrape tanning process.

Tools you will need :

Fleshing Beam

Fleshing beams come in many shapes and forms. Traditionally a round or split hardwood log was used, 6 to 8 inches in diameter. The log can either be lent against a tree or wall in an upright manner or fixed diagonally in a frame at abdomen height.

Recently I have started using a plastic pipe as a fleshing beam as it is lighter and easier for me to transport to classes.

Wet scraper/ Flesher

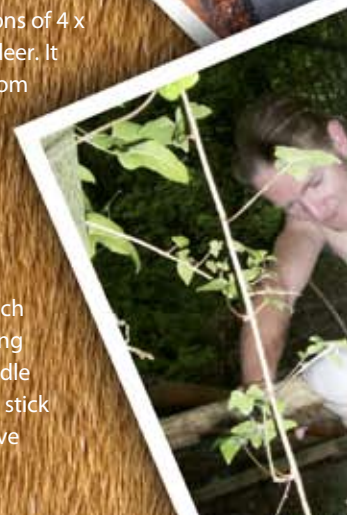
This is the most important tool in wet scrape tanning. It is a flat metal bar, 14 inches long, about 2 inches wide and ¼ inch thick. The edge of the blade must be pronounced but not sharp. I have known people to use a blunt draw knife, a leaf spring or the rib of a bison for this, they all worked well.

Hide frame

A structure in which the deer skin is fixed during the softening process. The size depends on the animal, but dimensions of 4 x 6 feet will work well for the average deer. It can be made from poles harvested from the woods and lashed together, or from store bought 4 x 2 inch timber that is screwed together to make a frame.

Softening tool

A kind of ‘paddle’ that is used to stretch and agitate the fibres of the skin during the softening process. A pick axe handle with a bevelled end works well, but a stick from the woods can be just as effective provided it has a wide end.

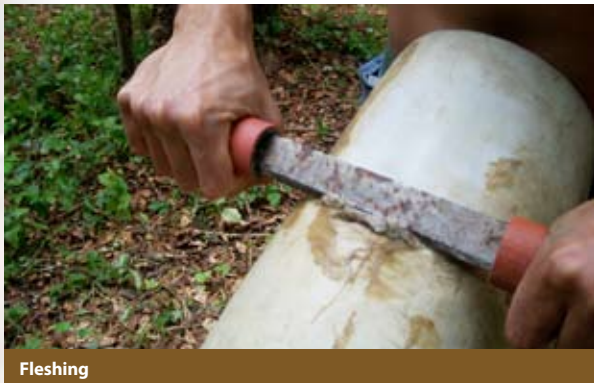


Abrader

An abrader is used to fluff the surface of the skin. Sandstone, pumice and sandpaper work well as abraders. This is yet another vital part of the process to stretch the fibres and soften the skin.

Fleshing

The first step in tanning is to remove the remaining flesh and fat attached to the skin. This is done by clamping the skin between your abdomen and the fleshing beam, whilst using the fleshing tool as a plough to push the flesh away from you and off the skin. This will also remove some of the membrane, which is a fibrous material that connects the skin to the flesh. Do not worry about removing all of the membrane as the remnants will be easier to remove later in the process.

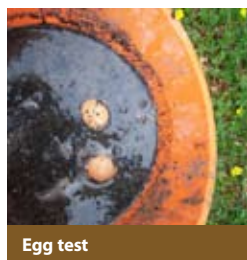


Fleshing

Bucking.

Buckskin gets its name from this part of the job. Bucking is the process of putting the hide into an alkaline solution, traditionally this is a concoction made from the white ashes of hard woods.

The solution is made by mixing the ashes with water, to resemble the consistency of pancake batter. I usually make up about half a bucket. Leave to settle for 15 minutes and then place an egg into the settled water. You can tell how alkaline the solution is by the buoyancy of the egg. If it floats upright with an area about the size of a pound coin above the surface, the pH is suitable. If the egg sinks, the solution is too weak and if it rises up and lies on its side the solution is too strong.

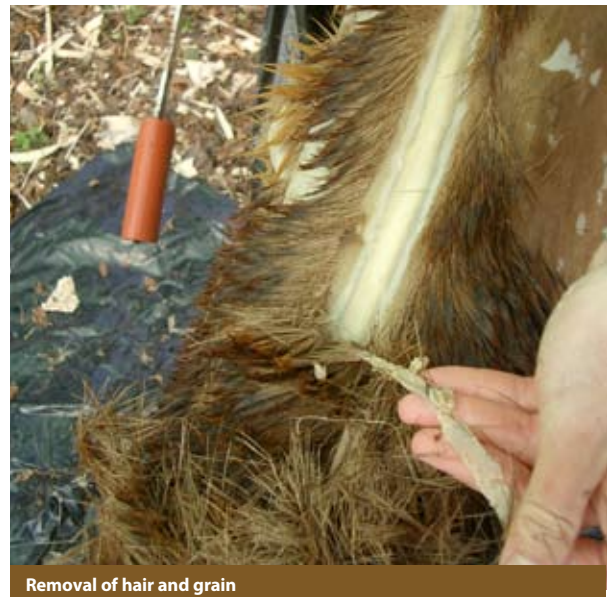


Egg test

The hide should be submerged in the solution for between 3 and 7 days depending on the air temperature - the lower the temperature the longer the immersion. To tell if the hide has completed the bucking process, it will look tawny in colour and be extremely swollen with a slimy texture. Bucking can make your hands dry and chapped, so wash them frequently or wear gloves. Goggles are a good idea, if you're worried about the solution splashing in your eyes.

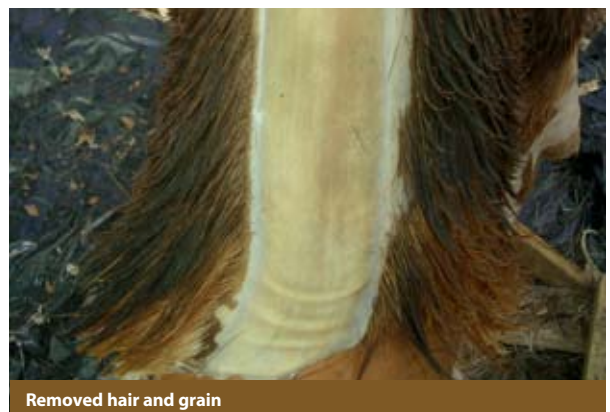
Graining

Now that the hide is swollen the layer of skin known as the grain can be removed. This is achieved by using the same technique carried out in the fleshing process. Using the fleshing tool push off the hair and then the grain, by scraping from the hair side of the skin. As the fleshing tool is not sharp, damage to the main body of the skin should not occur. Don't worry about putting too much pressure on the hide, although on the edges and around holes the skin can tear as its thinner. It's very important to remove all the grain because if you don't the skin can become stiffened and when smoked will be an uneven colour. Also the smoke is unable to penetrate the grain, but more about that later. Being methodical is the key, I scrape a section in one direction until I reach the edge, then move the skin around continue scraping from the completed area. I can then clearly see where I've scraped and where I haven't.



Removal of hair and grain

When the skin has been scraped, it will be much lighter in weight but still swollen and slippery. I have to warn you it's a lot of hard work, especially when scraping the neck, but the finished product makes it all worth while! Now it should be put back into the alkaline solution for a couple of hours for a final and easier penetration. This last immersion cleans away the mucus that locks the skins internal fibres.



Removed hair and grain

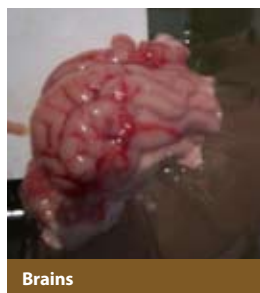
Rinsing

If you are lucky enough, as I am, to have a river running through your garden or if you have access to a large pond or lake, you can sink the hide over night to allow the alkaline solution to be leached out. Alternatively you can rinse the hide in a large barrel of water with a trickling hose for about 24 hours or by changing the water, up to 8 times. You can tell when the alkali has been removed as the hide will cease to feel slimy and swollen and will turn from a tawny colour to white. Once done, take the hide back to the fleshing beam and remove the remainder of the membrane. This action will also press some of the water out.

Braining

People are usually misled when the phrase 'brain tanning' is used because the brains act not as a chemical process, as with other forms of tanning, but instead provide a lubricant to coat the internal fibres of the skin.

The more brains the better, around a 1lb will do, either place them in a liquidizer or grind them up with a pestle and mortar until they become liquefied. The puree should then be added to half a gallon of warm water.



Brains

Submerge the skin in the 'brain' solution and stretch and work the hide so that the skin absorbs the liquid, paying close attention to the edges. Some tanners leave it in the solution over night but I leave for about twenty minutes. Wear rubber gloves if you have hands that are cut or scratched.

Wringing

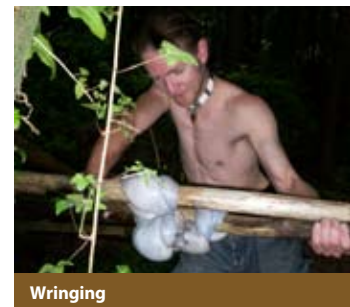
Before the softening and drying process begins, it is vital that excess moisture from the brain solution is removed from the skin. This is achieved by rolling the hide up into a ring over a smooth round horizontal beam. A stick can be past through the ring and twisted rather like a tourniquet until the hide begins to tighten up and the moisture is squeezed out.

Having removed as much moisture as possible, the hide should again be placed in the brain solution to absorb more liquid and again taken to the wringing beam and wrung. The braining and wringing can be done 2, 3, 4 times to force the lubricating brains between the skins fibres.

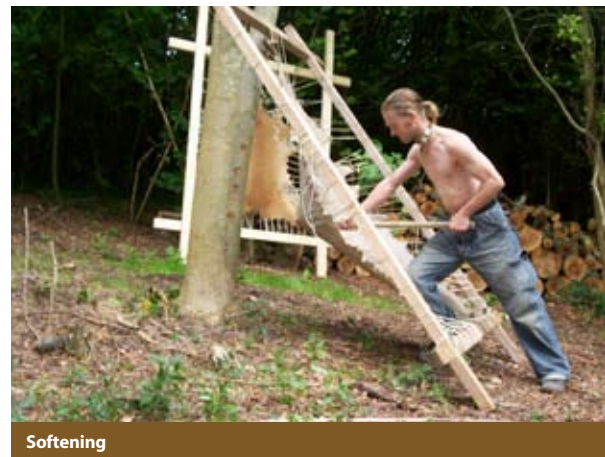
Softening

After the wringing process the hide is loosely laced into the hide frame. This is achieved by cutting inch long holes 5-6 inches apart around the perimeter of the hide. Lengths of nylon or sisal string work well for the lacing. Pass the string around the frame, then tie off onto the skin as this will stop the hide from slipping in the frame.

Taking the softening tool start moving the skin fibres around. Think of this as a deep aggressive massage and don't be afraid to put a lot of force on the hide. I often use all my body weight, leaning and pushing on the softening tool. My students are surprised at the degree of force a hide will take. When you have worked the whole skin using multi directional strokes, move your attention to the edges and using your thumbs and forefingers pull and twist the skin edges. It is important that you don't forget the edges otherwise they will stiffen up.



Wringing



Softening

The softening process can last from two to eight hours, all dependant on atmospheric factors. I look forward to days that are warm and sunny with a breeze because the drying and softening occurs quickly. It is important to keep the fibres moving until the skin is bone dry and after a little experience you can take five to ten minute breaks. If you stop the ritual of softening when the skin is still damp, it will dry hard and not soft, like velvet.

As the skin begins to dry it is also important to commence the abrading of both sides of the skin. This can be done with a sandstone/paper or a pumice stone, which is my preference. Do this in between using the softening tool. Again, be methodical, covering the entire skin.

If your hide does have some hard and stiff areas, don't worry, just return it to the brain solution, wring and soften again. If your hide comes out beautifully soft, you can sit back and feel very proud of yourself. You've made genuine brain tanned buckskin! The hide will now be a beautiful snow white. Native people used to manufacture ceremonial regalia from white buckskin, only to be worn for special occasions though,

because if it became damp it would turn stiff again. Not much use in the woods! Ever tried stalking a deer wearing cardboard?

Smoking

To stop the hide turning stiff and to give the skin that typical golden buckskin colour, it needs to be smoked. An amazing thing happens to the hide during smoking which allows it to be worn in the rain or washed. When dry, after a few short stretches, the hide will retain its softness. It's to do with the changing of the proteins but I prefer to think of it as magic!

There are many ways to smoke a hide, such as draping it over your shelter rafters, above the fire pit, to creating an elaborate smoking house. The technique that I am about to describe is the method that I use and has given me the most even colouring.

If smoking one hide, fold it in half along the back bone and either sew or glue the edges together leaving an opening at the neck. At home I like to use white wood glue, as it is clean and quick to use. In the woods you can use hide glue or sew it up with natural fibres such as sinew. At the neck end sew it to a smoking sack, which is a tube made of heavy material such as canvas or denim.



Smoking

The hide and smoking sack should be suspended over a hole in the ground that is 12 inches wide by 18 inches deep. A fire of hard woods is burnt in the hole to create a bed of coals, on which a layer of dry rotten wood is placed to create a thick smoke. The smoking sack is pinned to the ground with rocks and acts as a chimney to direct the smoke upwards into the hide. After a while you will see smoke permeating through the pores in the skin.

It is important to monitor the smoking wood for flare ups. This can be achieved by periodically placing your hand over the coals to feel for particularly warm areas. By adding more rotten material the hot coals are kept submerged.

When you see some colour beginning to appear through the skin, you can peel open a small opening in the seam of the hide to look inside. If it has taken the colour you want, remove the hide and sack from the smoking fire, turn inside out and smoke the other side. If the hide has taken any colour at all it has now been made safe from stiffening when washed or worn

in the rain. After the initial colour, the eventual shade of the buckskin is down to aesthetics.

After you have smoked the hide, you can open up the seams and removing the smoking sack, roll around on the floor with your new buckskin, feeling totally exhausted and slightly emotional, exclaiming, "Two more and I've got a shirt!" I can't tell you the joy buckskin brings - It is such a versatile material. When wet it retains it's warmth rather like wool. It is fantastic as a camouflage, both in appearance and smell, the faint wood smoke aroma, disguising your own. It blocks the wind but also breathes and lets your sweat out. It's the most natural, biodegradable fabric out there.



Buckskin in action

For me the greatest advantage of buckskin is how it 'changes' me. It's hard to describe but when I'm wearing buckskin in the woods, I act and move differently. I slow down and take more in and I instinctively move as the fox. My awareness expands so that I see and experience more of the world. It's as if the spirit of the deer has joined with mine and allowed me to see and feel the world as I should. That may sound kind of wacky but trust me, put on a buckskin shirt and you'll see and feel the difference.

Please feel free to contact me with questions or your experiences with tanning. It's good to share the knowledge.