

# How to Field-dress a White-tailed Deer



## STEP 1: BE PREPARED AHEAD OF TIME

Before you leave your vehicle or campsite to go hunting, make sure you have the following materials with you:

- Kill tag with string already attached
- Flashlight
- Knife that has been recently sharpened
- Small rag (any color other than white) to wipe off hands
- Rope to tie legs and/or to drag the deer
- Blaze orange material to hang on a tree above the field-dressing site
- Several small pieces of string or twine
- Large plastic bag (self-sealing) for heart and/or liver.

## STEP 2: GET ORGANIZED

Once you shoot a deer you may become very excited. You may forget important laws about the tagging of deer. Remember that handling a sharp knife requires attention and patience.

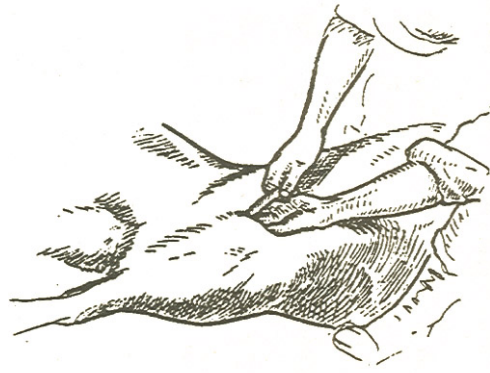
- Approaching a downed deer.** Do not excitedly run up to a downed deer. The deer may not be dead and may injure you by thrashing about or it may get up and run away. Instead, cautiously approach a downed deer from the side away from its legs. Be ready to discharge a finishing shot with your bow or firearm. However, do not do so unless absolutely necessary; some muscle contractions can be involuntary and may not be a sign that the deer is still alive. Look to see if there are any signs of chest movement from breathing, eye blinking, or quivering of muscles. If so, remain about ten feet away, ready to fire a finishing shot if the deer begins to get up, and wait for the deer to expire. If there is no sign of movement, and the eyes are “glazed,” you may still want to carefully touch the eyes softly with a three to four foot long stick to make sure the deer is dead. If the deer is not dead this will cause it to react (e.g., blinking, moving, etc...). You do NOT have to cut the throat of the deer to drain blood. Normal field dressing procedures will “bleed out” the deer. Also, do not cut the scent glands from the legs of the deer; this may contaminate the meat.

- B. Unload.** When you are sure the downed deer is dead, unload your firearm, un-nock and put your arrow away, or take the cap off the nipple of your muzzleloader. It is not safe to have loaded firearms and sharp broadheads in the vicinity of a field-dressing site.
- C. Attach your kill tag securely on the deer.** There are two styles of kill tags available to hunters, kill tags printed on computer terminals of the retail sales system (RSS-tags) and kill tags purchased from the Michigan DNR e-license on the Internet (e-tags). The procedures for legally attaching each style of kill tag follows:
- RSS-tags: Carefully notch all required information (e.g., date, antler points, sex, etc...) on the kill tag with your knife. Fold the kill tag in half to form a crease in the license. Peel the paper backing off the kill tag. Place a piece of string (cut long enough to easily tie to the deer) within the crease of the license, on the adhesive side. Ensuring that the bar code on the kill tag remains flat, fold the tag over the string and adhere it to itself. If a hard plastic “kill tag backer” is obtained from a license dealer, follow the instructions provided on it. Tie the validated kill tag securely to the deer by fastening it to the antler, lower jaw, or lower leg in a fashion that is completely visible for inspection.
  - E-tags: Carefully notch all required information (e.g., date, antler points, sex, etc...) on the kill tag with your knife. Place a piece of string or wire (cut long enough to easily tie to the deer) through the hole on the tag. Tie the validated kill tag securely to the deer by fastening it to the antler, lower jaw, or lower leg in a fashion that is completely visible for inspection.
- D. Photograph your deer.** The best photos are often taken before field dressing your deer. In most cases, you may want to reposition the deer to be in the best light, make it look more “natural,” and/or be on clean ground or snow. If the deer’s tongue is hanging outside its mouth, push it back in its mouth. Wipe any debris or excess blood that is visible to the camera off the deer
- E. Move the deer to a nearby spot where you will be able to field dress the animal comfortably.** Whenever moving your deer, be sure to use care in preventing lower back or abdominal injuries. If the animal is heavy or difficult to move, enlist the assistance of a friend or hunting partner. When you are about to move your deer, try to find a nearby opening where you will be visible to other hunters. When field-dressing a deer in thick under-brush it may be difficult for other hunters to identify you while you are bending over the deer. Place the deer on its back with its head uphill, if possible.
- F. Hang something blaze orange on one of the nearby trees or above your head.** You may want to remove your hunting jacket to prevent getting blood on the sleeves (or to prevent overheating in warmer temperatures). In this case place your jacket on a limb of a nearby tree so other hunters can easily identify your location. However, remain wearing something that is blaze orange, such as a hat or a vest. If you are bowhunting in camouflage, it is still wise to hang a piece of blaze orange fabric on a nearby branch.
- G. Organize your equipment.** Designate a specific area at the field-dressing site where you can monitor and easily locate your knife and other equipment. A surprising number of hunters lose (or spend an unnecessary amount of time trying to relocate, knives, gloves and other equipment in the snow and leaves at their field-dressing site.
- H. RELAX!** Safety should be your highest priority while field-dressing a deer. Many hunters cut themselves with their knives because they are hurrying or not paying attention to what they are doing. In addition, cold temperatures can cause wet hands and fingers to become numb. Such conditions require extra care when handling a knife. You should take breaks while field-dressing your deer to allow your self to warm-up or relax.

**STEP 3: MAKE AN INCISION FROM THE BREASTBONE DOWN TO (BUT NOT THROUGH) THE ANUS OR VAGINA. DO NOT CUT SO DEEP THAT YOU SLICE INTO THE INTERNAL ORGANS.**

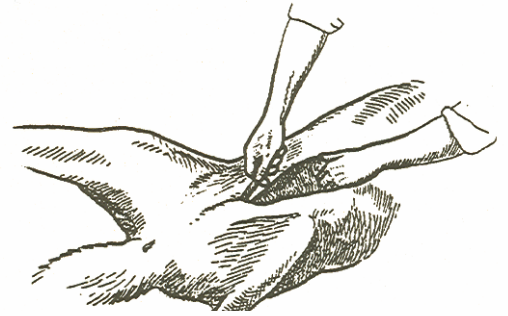
- A. Locate the sternum (breastbone).** Insert your knife at the bottom of the sternum. Keep the blade edge pointing upward when making the first cut. (Although there are other methods to begin field-dressing, we recommend the initial incision be made at the breastbone to reduce the possibility of cutting internal organs.)
- B. Cut through the abdominal wall (not just the skin and hide).** Keep the edge of the knife blade positioned upwards toward the hide (from the inside), not down toward the organs. Cutting upwards through the hide

helps to prevent cutting the internal organs and aids in maintaining blade sharpness. Cutting downward through the deer's hair quickly dulls a knife's edge. Insert your index (second) and middle finger of your non-cutting hand into your original incision. Forming the shape of a "V" with these two fingers, gently pull up on the hide. Insert the blade into the incision between the two fingers, using it simultaneously as a guide for your knife and a way to keep your knife blade away from internal organs while cutting. Continue cutting to the penis of a buck or to the udder of a doe.



**C. Cut around both sides of the penis and testicles or udder.**

Be careful not to cut the urinary bladder, which will be removed in a later step. For bucks, Reach inside the body cavity and cut the base of the penis and testicles so they can be removed. For does, cut around both sides of the udder and remove it from the carcass. Check the udder for signs of milk. This can be done by cutting through the fatty portion of the



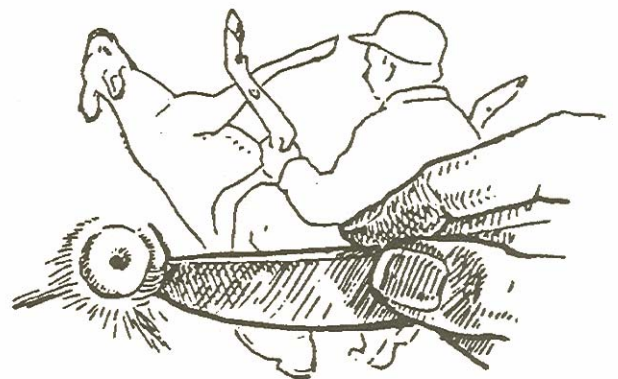
udder with your knife. If the doe has been lactating, milk will seep from the cut. DNR at a check station may ask you whether or not the doe was still lactating.

**D. Cut deeply in a circular motion around the anus of a buck and the anus and vagina of a doe.**

The circle should be about two inches in diameter and your knife should be inserted about four inches deep, between the rectum and pelvis bone. **DO NOT** cut the rectum. Instead, pull it sideways in a circular motion, so you are cutting around the outside of it. If there are pellets or other fecal material present, you may want to tie the intestine in a knot above the rectum or use a piece of string to tie the rectum shut.

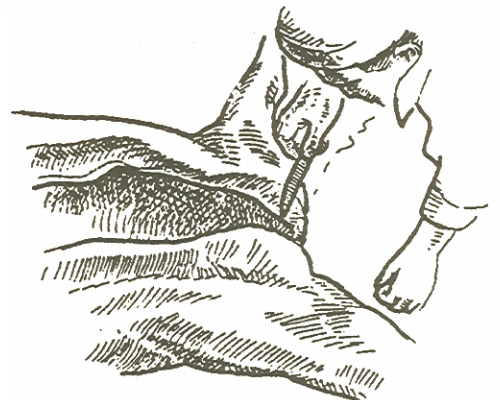


**E. We do not recommend splitting the pelvis in the field.** Instead, push the tied-off rectal and reproductive tracts through the hole in the pelvis and toward the abdomen. Be careful that you do not puncture or burst the urinary bladder.



**STEP 4: REMOVE THE URINARY BLADDER AND TRACT.**

The bladder is a pear-shaped translucent sac in the lower abdomen that may or may not be filled with urine. Be especially careful in handling the bladder so that urine does not spill and taint the meat. Pinch off the bladder with one hand and slowly cut it free and remove it with the other hand. Another method is to use a piece of string to tie and then cut the urinary duct about an inch beyond the base of the bladder. Once the bladder and

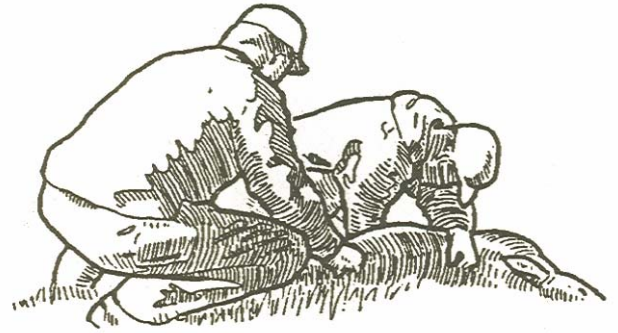


urinary tract is free, place it some distance away from the carcass so that urine will not get on the meat.

**STEP 5: ROLL THE INTERNAL ORGANS OUT OF THE ABDOMINAL CAVITY OF THE DEER.**

The carcass can now be rolled onto its side so the entrails will roll out onto the ground. Some cutting will be necessary to free the organs from the back of the deer and to cut the esophagus and blood vessels near the diaphragm. The esophagus should be pinched or tied off prior to cutting to prevent spilling stomach contents into the abdominal cavity.

(Although there are other methods to remove internal organs, the DNR recommends that hunters first empty the abdominal cavity and then work to empty the chest cavity.)

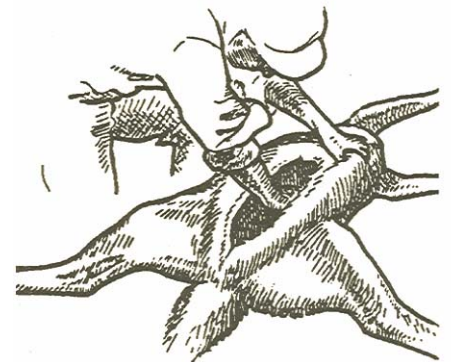


**STEP 6: RETURN TO THE UPPER PART OF THE DEER AND CUT THROUGH THE EDGE OF THE DIAPHRAGM, WHERE IT MEETS THE RIBS.**

- A. **Cut the diaphragm away from the ribs on both sides of the deer.** The diaphragm is a tough membranous muscle that separates the chest cavity (containing the heart and lungs) from the abdominal cavity (containing the intestines, four-chambered stomach, liver and other organs).
- B. **Reach into the chest with your hands. With your fingers forward, follow the esophagus as far as you can. Cut through the windpipe and esophagus as far up as you can reach.** Be sure to use care with your knife in this position. Without being able to see exact location of your hands and your knife, it can be very easy for you to accidentally cut yourself during this step. If you have no plans doing a taxidermy mount of your deer, you can first use your knife to cut the cartilage and hide along the breast bone before cutting the esophagus and windpipe.
- C. **Pull the windpipe downward, while cutting any attachments to the back of the carcass.** Roll the deer on its side to empty the heart and lungs from the chest cavity.

**STEP 7: CLEAN THE BODY CAVITY**

Roll the deer carcass all the way over so that the opening to the body cavity can drain. However, don't contaminate the meat with dirt and debris. After a few minutes, roll the deer over on its back and remove any debris. The use of snow or water for cleaning the inside of the cavity is not recommended in most cases. Rinse out the body cavity with water or snow ONLY if the carcass has been tainted by contents of the digestive or urinary tracts. If this is done, dry the excess water in the cavity as quickly as possible.



**STEP 8: REMOVE THE DEER FROM THE FIELD**

- A. **Dragging a buck by pulling the antlers or a doe by pulling the front legs is acceptable for only short drags.** For moderate drags a rope may be used to tie the forelegs together and through the base of both antlers. Do not place the rope around the neck of the deer, especially if plan to have a taxidermy mount prepared. For long drags, deer should be placed on a plastic sled or taken out of the field on stretchers, poles, wheelbarrows, deer carts, ATVs, or other devices. Some hunters have suffered heart attacks while dragging deer. In some cases, those could have been avoided by concealing the tagged carcass in heavy cover and coming back to the site with a partner or vehicle to help drag the deer out of the field.
- B. **Don't forget the heart and liver.** These are excellent cuts of meat that many hunters leave in the field. If you do not have a plastic bag to carry these organs, place them inside the chest cavity for transport while carcass is being removed from the field.

- C. Hang the deer in a shady area to drain the carcass and cool down the meat.** Most Michigan hunters hang their deer with the head up and the tail down. We recommend that the animal be hung with the head down. Hang the deer high enough to be out of reach of animals and pets. Make sure that air is capable of circulating through the chest cavity to facilitate cooling. Some hunters use one or two sticks placed sideways in the chest cavity. It is not necessary to hang deer for much time other than to drain the blood. Bacterial growth increases when carcass temperatures reach above 40 degrees Fahrenheit and venison spoils quickly when ambient temperatures reach above 50 degrees Fahrenheit. **Aging and curing the meat is not necessary.** The DNR recommends the deer be processed as soon as possible.

## VENISON RECIPES

### Rolled Venison Roast

4lb. piece of venison (rump or top of round, rolled and tied)	4 cups of milk
½ t. pepper	1 bay leaf
½ t. onion salt	½ t. garlic powder
1 can cream of chicken soup	5 T. shortening
1 can cream of mushroom soup	1 C. water
1 onion (chopped)	

Soak meat 1-2 hours in milk. Remove meat from milk and sprinkle with pepper, garlic, and onion salt. Brown meat in shortening over high heat. Put meat in a covered roasting pan, add soups, bay leaf, onion and water. Roast 2 ¼ hours at 300° F.

### Dolfi's Secret Slow-cooked Venison

2-3 lbs venison	29 oz. tomato sauce
1 stick butter	1 can tomato paste
1 onion (sliced)	½ t. baking soda
1 green pepper (sliced)	2 T. Italian seasoning
1 clove garlic (minced)	1 T. beef bouillon
pepper and salt to taste	

Melt butter in skillet. Brown venison, onion, and green pepper in a skillet. Put half of the tomato sauce and remainder of other ingredients in a crockpot. Add venison, onions, and green pepper to crockpot. Add remainder of tomato sauce to crockpot. Cook on high until it boils. Turn to low and cook 5 to 7 hours. Serve with rice.

### Venison Soup

2½ lbs. venison	2 T. chopped parsley
2 qts. Cold water	3 C tomato juice
1 C. diced carrots	2 T. salt
1½ C. diced potatoes	¼ t. pepper
¾ C. diced celery	½ t. savory
½ C. chopped onions	1 T. sugar

Simmer meat in salted water for 2 to 2½ hours, skimming occasionally. Let broth stand overnight (or until fat has congealed). Remove congealed fat. Add vegetables, juice, and seasonings. Simmer slowly for 2-3 hours.

### Venison Stir-fry

2 lbs. venison (sliced thin)	¼ C. sesame oil
½ C. baby pea pods	¼ C. chopped green pepper
½ C. sliced carrots	6 large mushrooms (sliced)
8 oz. water chestnuts	½ C. chicken broth
¼ C. diced celery	¼ T. dry mustard
¼ C. chopped onions	3 to 4 C. cooked rice

Heat pan or wok to 375° F. Add oil. Cook venison until browned and remove from pan. Cook vegetables, chicken broth, and mustard until vegetables are nearly tender. Add cooked venison. Simmer 5 to 10 minute or until vegetables are tender. Serve over rice.