

# HANDLING YOUR BEAR TROPHY AND MEAT

## PREPARATIONS PRELIMINARY TO THE HUNT

1. If you hire a guide, you should ask whether handling of trophy and meat is included in their package, or how much assistance they can provide.
2. You should contact a reputable taxidermist in advance of your hunt to obtain detailed instructions as to how the animal should be skinned and stored. At this time you should also ask about prices and various options available for your finished trophy. If you do not care to preserve the trophy for your own use, Minnesota laws allow the sale of bearskins of legally taken bears, and you may wish to consider this as an alternative to waste.
3. Many small communities in the bear range have one or more custom meat processors who will handle bear meat (i.e. cut, trim, wrap and grind/blend bear burger). Every hunter or party of hunters should make an attempt to locate such a processor in advance to determine if these services will be available and the hours that a carcass can be received, (often you won't get there until late at night). Local gas stations, grocery stores or taverns may be good places to inquire about processing. It would also be a good idea to locate the nearest bear registration station at the same time, and you might be able to obtain processing information there.

Since many small processors do not particularly care to handle bear meat, it may be helpful to offer to pay a premium for careful handling of your meat. Generally, such places are reasonably priced, and even at a premium, the price will be reasonable.

If you must travel a long distance and have not found a processor, plan to skin the animal immediately, removing most, if not all, of the fat from the hide (depending on your skill as a skinner). Every effort should be made to avoid making holes in the skin, though a few minor cuts present no real problem to the taxidermist.

## GUIDELINES TO KEEPING THE MEAT PALATABLE

The principal concern in handling your bear is the same as with all other big game, that is to allow the body heat to escape from the meat, then to further cool the carcass as quickly as possible. Bearskin is an excellent insulator, and it is imperative that it be removed from the carcass as quickly as possible. The temptation to leave a bear unskinned overnight should be resisted. It is not pleasant to skin a bear in lantern light or under automobile headlights late at night when you are bone tired, but the alternative is the complete waste of good meat and possibly the loss of a fine trophy.

Ideally, the meat should be cooled slowly to a point somewhat above freezing, then held at that temperature for several days (or longer, according to your tastes and facilities available) then cut and wrapped. Unfortunately, due to the remoteness of much of the bear range, this procedure is not possible, except under unusual circumstances, and any method of cooling is preferable to none, in terms of the palatability of the meat.

If you are a member of a party of hunters, you can often work together to reduce the time required to properly handle a bear.

Removal of the viscera (entrails) is done in much the same manner as any big game, though perhaps more care should be taken in avoiding contact of large quantities of blood with the hair side of the skin. This is not critical, but it does make further handling, skinning, and final handling by your taxidermist much easier and more pleasant.

Normally when an animal is skinned in the field, the skull, pads, and a section of each lower leg bone should be left attached to the skin so the taxidermist can skin out these portions.

The next step is to remove the fat layer from the carcass. The fat layer on a bear carcass in September will be from one to three inches thick and, depending upon the size of the animal, will nearly fill a 20-gallon garbage can. The removal of the fat can be likened to a "second skinning" process and it can generally be removed in strips. The process is much easier if weather is cool and the fat is solidified, and it is also less urgent under such conditions as spoilage will occur much more slowly. If temperatures are warm, as they often are in September, and the fat is semi-liquid on the surface and translucent, then quick removal is essential to preservation of flavor of the meat. The fat may well be saved as it is useful for cooking, leather preservation, or lubrication purposes.

After removal of the fat, the carcass should be split lengthwise. The use of a gambrel, either one made expressly for the purpose, or one fashioned from a heavy stick is needed to spread the hind legs and to support the carcass when it is hung from a tree or any other structure available. A carpenter's crosscut handsaw or a coarse-toothed meat saw can be used to split the carcass, by sawing down the midline from the base of the tail to the neck. One person standing at the front and back of the carcass can saw and steady the carcass and guide the saw to ensure the mid-line is followed closely. If done properly, each vertebra will be separated into right and left halves, and the saw will follow the center of the spinal cord.

After the carcass is split, it can readily be reduced to any number of portions for cooling. If necessary, the portions can be adequately cooled by arranging in several ice chests. Contact of meat with water is discouraged by some, but this alternative is far better than spoilage. Portions should not be placed in plastic bags before placing in ice, since the plastic will retain heat and insulate the meat from the ice.

If you have access to a freezer, it can be used to help preserve meat prior to processing. The quarters or smaller portions should be placed in plastic or cloth bags which are, in turn, placed in the freezer (without the bags is better). Again, the plastic bags will help to retain heat, but if quartered, the meat will normally be firm, but not frozen by morning (i.e., overnight). The smaller the portions, the quicker they will become frozen. You may allow the meat to freeze through, though the flavor may be affected if it is to be thawed before final cutting and wrapping. Partial freezing (i.e., cooling until firm) is a good alternative if you cannot deliver the quarters to a processor until the next morning. Any method or technique for cooling your bear meat is better than none.

Bear meat, if properly handled, is delicious and may be prepared in almost any way that domestic meats are. Bear meat should always be thoroughly cooked (as should pork for the same reason). Bear liver contains an extremely high concentration of the "B" vitamins, and should not be eaten as it may produce toxic effects. Bear meat will not retain its flavor for extended periods of time, even if carefully handled, packaged and frozen. Double wrapping will prolong the freezer life, somewhat, but even with the precautions, it will begin to lose flavor after several months in the freezer. If you do not plan to consume your bear meat within several months, you should consider giving part of the meat to others to avoid waste. Transfer of bear meat as a gift is lawful, as long as the meat is properly marked and identified, as provided by law and regulation.

# BEAR HIDE PREPARATION FOR TAXIDERMISTRY PURPOSES

By American Taxidermy Incorporated

1. Ensure field dressing cut is down center.
2. Skin bear as soon as possible (leave pads & head attached, if necessary).
3. Place hide in cool place until body heat is minimized.
4. Fold hide in half once – HAIR OUTSIDE – HIDE INSIDE (with the head outside) – consult a taxidermist prior to your hunt.
5. Place cooled hide in plastic garbage bag.
6. If freezing is not possible, do not put hide in plastic. Just keep cool and transport to taxidermist as soon as possible.
7. If freezing or taxidermist is not available for more than 24 hours, skin out head and paws, flesh entire hide clean, and salt entire hide using uniodized salt.
8. Never wash a hide with water or drag or handle a bear by the neck.