



Elk Foundation: 10 Tips for Processing Your First Elk

MISSOULA, Montana—Hunting season is well underway. You finally tag an elk or deer but now the local butcher is swamped, forcing you into a crash course in processing your own meat. Fear not, says the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, which offers the following tips and diagram to guide you.

"Many hunters don't venture into butchering until they're forced, either by economics or necessity," said P.J. DelHomme, hunting editor of "Bugle," the Elk Foundation's member magazine, "but once they try it, it often becomes an enjoyable extension of the hunt. Converting a game animal into food is another way to connect with land and habitat and wild places."

1. Hanging meat for aging and tenderizing is usually preferred but if you don't have a temperature-controlled environment between 35 and 50 degrees, the process can be risky. Consider getting the meat cut, packaged and into the freezer ASAP.
2. Wild game can be aged and tenderized later using an alternative process. Remove a package of meat from the freezer and allow it to partially thaw. When the meat is beginning to soften and covered with slushy ice crystals, put a tally mark on the package and refreeze. Then repeat. When a package has three tally marks, it's ready for cooking.
3. The four basic tools for butchering are simple around-the-house tools. You will need a good sharp knife, a whetstone to keep the knife sharp, a hacksaw and a cutting board. You may also wish to use rubber gloves.
4. Cleanliness is crucial. Rinse the skinned carcass (or quarters) and pat dry before you begin cutting. Wash your tools with soap and water before you start and clean your knife after each sharpening. If it's not too cold, set up a cleaning table outside and use a hose with a high-pressure nozzle.
5. The goal is to simply reduce the animal to individual muscles or groups of muscles, per the diagram. Start by removing the legs. Rear legs are jointed and fit into a socket in the hip. Front legs fit onto the chest mainly with muscles and tendons. The rest of the animal basically is ribs, neck and spine, and meat can be filleted from these areas. Remove back straps by slicing down the center of the back and boning along spine outward onto ribs. Don't forget to take the tenderloins from the inside spine.
6. Don't try to make chops. Without professional-grade saws and butchering tools, consider simply cutting meat off the bones to make steaks, roasts, stew meat and jerky. When cutting a muscle into finished pieces, remember to cut across the grain of the meat.
7. Trim away bloodshot meat, connective tissue, membranes, cartilage, fat—anything you don't want to eat—and toss it into a bucket or trashcan lined with a plastic bag. Use another bag or tub for clean trimmings or cuts for grinding into burger. Freeze this bag of meat and take it to your butcher for grinding later when he or she isn't swamped.
9. If you have a vacuum-type food sealer, use it. Otherwise, wrap meat in cellophane and then butcher paper. Double wrapping is better. Mark each package with the date and type of cut. Expect finished meat to weigh less than 50 percent of the animal's live weight.
10. If your deer or elk came from a CWD area, special instructions may apply. Refer to the Web site of the RMEF-supported Chronic Wasting Disease Alliance, <http://www.cwd-info.org/>, for information.

For more information, photos, charts and breakdowns of cuts, go to the RMEF Web page <http://www.rmf.org/hunting> and click on "Carnivore's Kitchen."

About the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation

Snowy peaks, dark timber basins and grassy meadows. RMEF is leading an elk country initiative that has already conserved or enhanced habitat on over 5.4 million acres-a land area equivalent to a swath three miles wide and stretching along the entire Continental Divide from Canada to Mexico. Most work occurs on public lands. More than 570,000 acres have been opened or secured for public access including hunting, fishing and other recreation. Get involved at <http://www.rmf.org/> or 800-CALL ELK.

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