

# Processing your deer

## Deer processing is no longer “business as usual” in Wisconsin

By Scott Craven and Dennis Buege

The conclusion of a successful hunt will be a bit different for Wisconsin hunters this year. Due to concerns about Chronic Wasting Disease (CWD), some commercial processors, especially in southern Wisconsin, will not handle deer in 2002. Thus, many hunters will have to process their own deer—some for the first time. These guidelines will help both experienced and novice butchers obtain quality venison while minimizing exposure to the parts of a deer carcass that could contain CWD prions.

Even a novice can complete the process in a few hours. You'll end up with boneless, lean, high quality venison, and the confidence that you've processed it with as much care and caution as possible.

Good hunting, and enjoy your venison!

### Some general considerations:

- We recommend careful boning of the entire carcass.
- Wear latex/rubber gloves, both for field dressing and butchering.
- Put away the saw for now. You won't need it until you dismember the carcass for disposal.
- When you're finished, carefully clean and sanitize the knives and other tools you've used. Use a solution of 50% bleach and 50% water.
- Consider using a disposable cutting surface such as clean plywood or paneling. You may want to keep some towels handy during butchering.
- If the bullet shattered bone, especially the skull or spine, trim liberally around the damaged area.
- Watch for any special announcements regarding carcass disposal.
- Don't use garbage bags for meat storage. If you have more than one deer, label each freezer package so you can identify which deer it came from, in case you later decide to discard meat from that deer.

### Notes on Chronic Wasting Disease

As of October 2002 the following statements were supported by the scientific and wildlife management communities:

- In Wisconsin, CWD had been found only in the so-called CWD management areas in the southwest part of the state and on a game farm in Portage County.
- CWD has never been linked to disease in humans.
- Many deer will be tested throughout Wisconsin; you may want to store your venison until test results are in for your area.

### Processing advice

- Hang the deer and skin it as you always have. In these photos the deer is hanging head-up. However, hanging the deer head-down may prevent fluids in the head from draining down into the carcass.
- DO NOT remove the lower legs with a saw cut. Skin to below the shank, and then simply cut the hide away from the leg.
- For more information on skinning, see Extension publication G1598, *So You Got A Deer*, available for download at <http://learningstore.uwex.edu>  
NOTE: *This publication contains a lot of useful advice, but the butchering instructions involve saw use.*
- A warm carcass is easier to skin, but a cold carcass is much easier to cut up. When possible, hang and skin the deer as soon as you can. Weather and storage area permitting, let the skinned carcass hang and cool off before butchering.
- Once you have a hanging, skinned carcass you can begin working on 3 basic parts of the carcass — the shoulder, the backstrap (loin), and the hindquarter or round. These 6 pieces (3 per side) contain at least 80% of the useable meat, and all the choice cuts. You can remove all 6 pieces without cutting through any bones. You may find it easier to cut them up on a bench or table. Or you can remove the meat from the shoulders and rounds on the hanging carcass.
- Your goal is clean meat, trimmed free of fat and connective tissue before wrapping and freezing. Discard all bloodshot/damaged meat.
- Don't forget the inside tenderloins! Remove them from the interior of the body cavity either before or after other processing.



**THE SHOULDER.** Start with the shoulder, which is attached by cartilage and tissue that can be cut with a knife. Pull the shoulder away from the carcass to expose the “armpit” (Fig 1).

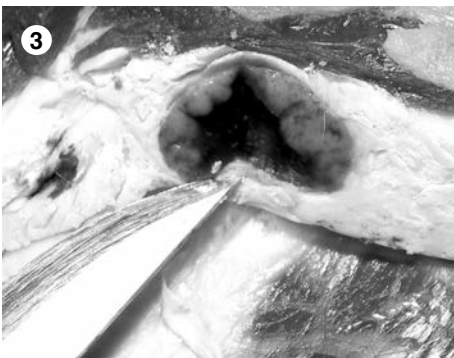


Place the shoulder on your cutting board, outer surface up. Locate the vertical portion of the shoulder blade bone with your knife

(Fig 4). Muscle bundles on either side of the shoulder blade can be filleted away from the bone. Remaining lean muscle and the shank can be boned out from the long bone of the shoulder (“arm”). Use this meat for stew meat, burger, sausage trim, or jerky.



**Cut into the armpit** so you can pull the shoulder away from the carcass. Then a curved cut above the shoulder blade and through the tough cartilage and surrounding tissue will remove the shoulder (Fig 2).



**Watch for lymph nodes** embedded in the fat around the shoulder. Try to avoid them when cutting; if you accidentally cut into one (Fig 3), clean your knife before you continue cutting.



**THE BACKSTRAP.** Cut the backstrap (loin) away from each side of the spine by making a cut down along the spine through the fat and tough connective tissue on the back (Fig 5).



**You can better expose the strap** by peeling away the tough layer of tissue that covers it (Fig 6).

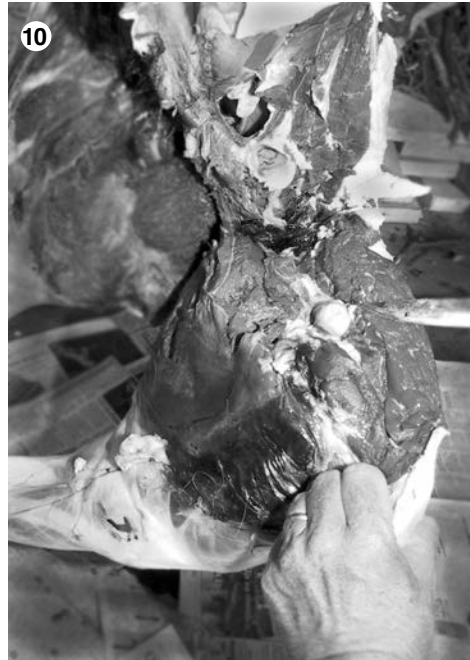


**By working along the sides of the spine and then the tops of the ribs with fingers and short knife strokes, you can pull the strap away from the carcass. Work up into the chuck (shoulder) and down into the rump as far as you can before hitting**

**bone. Then cut the strap away at each end and with a long cut along the rib cage the length of the strap (Fig 7).**

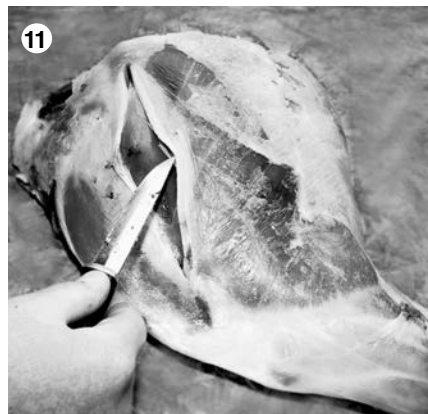


**You are left with a long strip of lean meat to trim and slice into roasts, chops, or thin sandwich steaks (Fig 8). Prepare butterfly chops by cutting a double-thickness slice, and then cutting most of the way through that slice. Fold it open to form a butterfly chop (Fig 9).**



**THE ROUND is easily removed by locating the ball-and-socket hip joint that connects the leg to the pelvis (Fig 10). Cut the surrounding tissue to expose the ball of the leg bone, then sever the joint with several knife strokes to the connective**

**tissue around the joint. You can lift the entire hind quarter away after a few knife strokes along the pelvis. If you keep your knife close to the pelvic bone, little usable meat will remain on the carcass.**



**Place the round outer surface up on your work table and locate the white seam in the surface tissue (Fig 11).**



**Cut through this thin layer to begin to expose the large muscles of the round that you need to separate. The big football-shaped muscle (Fig 12) is the sirloin tip. Bone this away from the leg bone, sever it at both ends and set it aside.**



**Your fingers work as well as a knife** for separating the various muscles. In the now-exposed interior of the leg, note a “plexus” or mass of blood vessels, nerves, and tissue (Fig 13). Cut away and discard all this material.



**Now remove the other large muscles** of the upper thigh—the top round, bottom round, and eye of round. The 4 pieces and the boned-out leg bone are shown in Figure 14.

### More information is available online.

- For current information on Chronic Wasting Disease in Wisconsin: <http://dnr.wi.gov/topic/wildlifehabitat/regulations.html>
- For more on butchering a deer, download Cooperative Extension publication G1598, *So You Got a Deer* <http://learningstore.uwex.edu/>



**Now you have separated** the large, lean muscle masses so they can be sliced across the grain into steaks (Fig 15).

**All that should remain on the round** is the large calf muscle behind and below the knee. It can be boned away for stew meat, burger, or sausage. At this point you have most of the venison boned, cut, and ready for the freezer. If you wish, you can remove additional lean meat from the neck, shoulder, brisket, and flanks. The neck offers long strips useful for jerky. Additional trim is best suited for stew meat, burger, or sausage.

**If you want to save the antlers**, dedicate a saw to just that purpose, and dispose of the saw blade when you're done, unless you plan to use it to cut up the boned-out carcass for disposal. Soak the skull cap for an hour in a 50/50 solution of bleach and water. Keep the antlers out of the solution to avoid bleaching them.

**UW**  
**Extension**  
Cooperative Extension

©2008 by the Board of Regents of the University of Wisconsin System doing business as the division of Cooperative Extension of the University of Wisconsin–Extension. All rights reserved. Send copyright inquiries to Cooperative Extension Publishing, 432 N. Lake St., Rm. 227, Madison, WI 53706.

**Authors:** Scott R. Craven is a professor of wildlife ecology at the University of Wisconsin–Madison and a wildlife specialist with the University of Wisconsin–Extension, Cooperative Extension. Dennis Buege was a professor of animal sciences and a meat specialist with the College of Agricultural and Life Sciences. Editor/photographer: Bob Cooney

Issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension, work, Acts of May 8 and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture, University of Wisconsin–Extension. The University of Wisconsin–Extension, Cooperative Extension provides equal opportunities in employment and programming, including Title IX and Americans with Disabilities (ADA) requirements. If you need this information in an alternative format, contact the Office of Equal Opportunity and Diversity Programs or call Cooperative Extension Publishing at 608-262-2655.

To see more publications or to order copies of this publication, visit our web site at <http://learningstore.uwex.edu> or call toll-free: 1-877-WIS-PUBS (947-7827).

**Processing Your Deer (G3847)**