

## **Making the Most of Wild Game**

### **By Dan Groebner**

Health conscious people already know the benefits of eating wild game. No worries about genetically modified venison steaks or antibiotic-riddled wild turkey breasts or drumsticks. Wild game meat has the same amount of protein with less fat than USDA Choice beef unless you're talking about a fall black bear fattened up for a long winter of hibernating. Recipes for wild game feasts can be found all over the internet, just in case you don't trust Uncle Ernie's famous catfish pickling concoction. However, the most important stage in bringing out the best flavors in game meat happens in the field long before you get to the kitchen.

So, you made the shot and immediately retrieved your prey. Believe it or not, it already may be too late to salvage any of the edibles of your quarry. If you are not prepared to cool the animal down as fast as possible and you shot a big cow elk during the early warm season, all your steaks and sausage could be at risk. But if you have the tools to skin and cool your elk or deer immediately, get ready for some delicious products of Mother Nature. Being prepared pays off on fishing trips also, as those gutted, cleaned and rinsed tiger trout go best on a bed of ice in a cooler for the ride home before you put them to bed on some wild rice at the dinner table.

For big game, you'll need a sharp skinning knife, sharpening stone, gloves, at least 12 feet of rope to elevate the carcass off the ground, plastic bags, towels and lots of fresh water to keep the flesh impeccably clean. With a chest shot, most animals will be bled out sufficiently so cutting the animal's throat will probably not be necessary. Field dressing the animal by removing the entrails through an incision made from between the legs up to the breast bone without piercing any of the internal organs is the first order of business to start the cooling process. To get at the heart and lungs, you might have to reach up into the body cavity. Many hunters covet the "hanger steak" cut, which is the part of the diaphragm attached to the spine side of the body cavity. Save any internal organs in plastic bags if you enjoy using as much of your prey as possible. You can tie off the intestine as it leaves the body in the pelvis area and then cut around it as it goes through the pelvis so its contents remain in the intestine.

Use the knife sparingly when skinning, more brute force just pulling the hide from the carcass will leave the meat in better shape and your hide without knife cuts. Salt the hide liberally and rub it in if you plan on tanning it. The salt will help dry out the hide and slow down spoilage temporarily.

A small hatchet or bone saw can help disassemble big game into smaller, more manageable pieces. Experienced outdoors-folks can break down an elk or deer into freezer-sized pieces with just a sharp knife and knowledge of joint anatomy, cutting surgically through the few ligaments that connect the bones to each other.

Bags of ice can be stuffed into the body cavity to help cool it down, in cases where the animal is not quartered and placed on ice or hung in a cool place. Cheesecloth wrapped around the body that is heavily sprinkled with black pepper will keep the bugs off your prize if it's hung outside. Make sure you have your animal properly tagged and evidence of its sex is still present until you get it to the butcher or your freezer. Talk to friends to find a meat processor who makes the cuts you prefer. In

addition to steaks and roasts, try some sausage, jerky or snack sticks.

For the DIY butcher, you'll want to be familiar with the aging process used to tenderize meat. Since most wild game is more lean, using “hang time” to let natural enzymes break down proteins makes the meat less chewy and gamey. A typical aging period at 32 – 40 degrees Fahrenheit (F) lasts from one to three weeks depending on the many factors that can make this stage of meat processing more of an art. Remember to keep the meat dry to prevent mold and bacteria growth.

Most of these same principles apply to other wild game in Arizona as well, including fish, fowl, doves, quail, pigeon, grouse, cranes, turkey, crayfish, bullfrogs, pheasants, squirrels, chukar, rabbits and javelina. Clean and cool the carcass immediately and treat the meat like USDA Prime+ cuts. Wash and dry all parts to bring out the true flavors of each species.

Some basic safety principles apply to a few species due to some new diseases of concern. Arizona has not had any cases of Chronic Wasting Disease (CWD) in our deer or elk but it has been found in adjacent states. There have been no cases of humans catching CWD from eating wild game but health officials advise not consuming the brain, spinal tissues, spleen, eyes (yum), tonsils or lymph nodes. Contact your local Game and Fish office before your hunt if you want to look into getting your game meat tested and do not transport whole carcasses from the infected states into Arizona.

When cleaning rabbits, it is a good idea to use gloves due to the possibility of the rabbit having tularemia which can be transmitted to humans through cuts in the skin or by eating uncooked meat. Many people like to gut and skin their rabbits in the field, just in case they are carrying mites or ticks. Large zip-lock bags to store the meat in work well for this if you remember to clean the meat well before bagging it.

Keeping your hard-earned prize of game meat clean and dry will bring out the best flavors that Mother Nature offers. Preparing your meat at temperatures above 325 degrees Fahrenheit long enough to get the internal meat temperature above 165 degrees F will assure you it is safe to eat. People with good health care plans have been known to consume rare venison steaks but you want to stay away from undercooked ducks, geese and javelina for sure (amongst all other wild game if you've ever taken a wildlife parasitology class in college).

Some folks may want to bring their crayfish home alive to “purge” or soak them and prepare them fresh, but actually, this is illegal in Arizona. All game taken in the wild must be dispatched before transport. Too many people have illegally moved wildlife from one place to another, causing expensive problems for the public and wildlife agencies. Escaped or purposefully released bullfrogs have invaded and taken over many waterways, eating all the native wildlife, since bullfrogs don't have their own predators that can control them in Arizona's habitats.

Fortunately, we don't have to rely on wild game to completely sustain ourselves these days as some of us would probably starve. Besides that, there wouldn't be enough wildlife to feed our ever-expanding human population. However, folks lucky enough to bag some wild game can look up their favorite recipe and prepare a healthy special meal that you can't find in any grocery store. Making this connection to our natural surroundings can give us a better appreciation of our pioneer ancestors who

originally settled this area and the importance of healthy wildlife habitats.