

The Caped Crusader

Cape and meat preservation



All you need for cape and meat processing

After countless hours of planning, months of training and hundreds, if not thousands of dollars spent in pursuit of your passion, it would be heart breaking to lose your cape or meat to spoilage. A solid preservation plan is essential prior to your trip, if you wing it, you could easily lose your meat and/or your cape.

I will tailor this article to sheep and goat size game, as game care on moose size animals is a whole other endeavor. Pursuing mountain animals, you will be restricted to the gear you are able to bring with you. As far as cutting utensils, I carry a skeletonized knife, suitable for cutting and fleshing, one small utility knife for caping and a plastic knife sharpener. The skinning shape of the knife, allows it to cut, de-bone and flesh admirably. Where the skinning knife falls short is during the caping process. A utility knife will allow you to release the skin from the skull, including the most difficult part between the horns. Between the horns is where a normal knife would have issues accessing the narrow strip.

Game bags are another essential item. You can make your own out of old bed sheets, by sewing them together but I prefer the pre-made bags. Recently I have purchased a few from Kuiu, which are made specifically for boned out meat. They seem to be very good quality but as of yet, I have yet to field test them.



Kuiu game bags

Salt is another essential and without it, you are more than likely to lose your cape. I and my partner will carry 5 lbs each. An excellent source of bulk salt is your local feed store. They will have 50 lb bags, and one should allow you to salt your entire grand slam.

Let's talk about what to do when your trophy hits the ground. The absolute first thing you need to accomplish is to cool your animal down. Even in minus temperatures an animal can spoil if left overnight and not opened up. There are two options to field dressing an animal, the traditional gut first method or the gutless method. I have been convinced of the merits of the gutless method over the course of the last few years. If you're not familiar with the gutless method, research it on the internet, there are videos and articles that are far better at explaining it than I would be.

After high fives and many pictures, I proceed to utilize the gutless method of removing the quarters, back-straps and tenderloins. All the while being very careful not to contaminate the meat with hair or dirt. I place the quarters on clean rocks or on the game bags if no rocks are available. Now de-bone the quarters and carefully inspect the meat for contamination before placing in the game bags. Absolutely identify which bag the back-straps and tenderloins are in as all the meat will look similar after it is de-boned and placed in a game bag. You do not want to mix up your tenderloin with a lesser cut for obvious reasons. If blow flies are evident, you may want to place the quarters in the bags prior to de-boning, until you have time to process each quarter.

Your meat is now safe and secure in the game bags but hold on, you still can't relax yet. If you're on a late season hunt and the temperature is cool, you're going to get off easy, just hang the game bags in a tree. This will keep the meat away from most predators, keep the direct sun off and the tree will direct any rain away from the trunk towards the tips of the branches. However if you're hunting early season or in unseasonably warm weather, you will need to be a little more creative. In the past my hunting partner and I were lucky enough to harvest a double header of Dall's sheep. The temperatures were close to 30 C and without a strategy we were going to lose our meat. Fortunately there was a glacier nearby and we were able to bury the cape and the meat. If the glacier wasn't available, I would have utilized a couple of other methods. I like to find a small glacier fed stream in the forest, where no sunlight can penetrate. Then build a small bridge over the stream, only a few inches above the water. Use large branches or small blown

down trees and when you have a wide enough platform, place your meat directly on top of it. This will keep your meat surprisingly cool. If either of the aforementioned methods aren't available to you, place your meat in a lake or river. Buy the strongest industrial garbage bags you can purchase, place the meat inside and then submerge it in the water. If you have any air in the bag this will be a frustrating exercise for you, so spend the time to eradicate all residual air.

Now that you have taken care of the meat, you need to turn your attention to your cape. As I mentioned regarding the gutless method of field dressing, I won't explain how I cape a sheep, because there are many other resources available to you that will be far more comprehensive than I could be here. Instead I will pass on some tips that someone else has taught me or I have learned from making a mistake.



The gland behind each goat horn

One of the mistakes a neophyte will make is cutting the cape short, believe me, this happens very frequently, to the chagrin of all taxidermists. Make sure you know what the glands look like behind the goats horns and don't cut them off. Once the cape is removed, make sure you split the lips and ears and then remove the cartilage from the nose. Any stick approximately the diameter of a hot dog and about 12" long will suffice. Round off the end of the stick in order to not push it through the end of the ear, the tip of the ear skin is very delicate. Remove as much muscle tissue and fat as you can prior to applying the

salt. Vigorously rub in the salt, paying special attention to the lips, ears and nose. Roll up the cape and then place it in a cool dark place, until you are ready to pack it out. When you are back at your truck, shake out the cape and then rub in fresh salt and the more salt the better. Splitting the lips, turning the ears and cleaning out the nose is where the utility knife will shine. Snap off the blade frequently in order to always have a surgically sharp tip.

Proper cape care can be tedious but in my opinion is the first step in an everlasting work of art and pays homage to the animal. My mounts always bring a smile to my face and allow me to emotionally travel to the time and location of the hunt.

Happy trails,
Mike Kirk