

Field Dressing your Deer

So you've shot a deer. Now what? You have a blood trail.....but no deer-YET. So, what do you do?

Finding your bolt/arrow:

In introduction, once you shoot your animal, you need to retrieve any of your equipment and then find the animal. Tracking an animal is not necessary if you have made a good shot, clean lung or heart shot with a rifle, muzzleloader or shotgun with a slug-it should go down on the spot, or if not, within a couple of steps of the spot you shot it. However, if you bow hunt, an animal can travel after it's been shot, before it runs out of oxygen and blood. A clean through and through with a bolt/arrow (I'll refer to bolts from here on as I'm a crossbow hunter) through the lungs and/or heart will drop an animal quite quickly, but expect up to a 50 yard track through the bush. If it's not a clean shot, expect to travel a long distance. I have tracked animals that have had gut shots for over 4 miles and 10 hours. Not fun. Be sure of your shot. If you aren't, don't take it! Alright, you've shot it.....first things first. You are going to be shaking like a leaf. This is a normal physiological reaction to the tons of adrenaline you put out. You might cry. You might throw up. It's all okay. The shaking will end pretty quickly. It's normal. So, now what? Find your equipment. You won't be thinking straight. Force yourself to slow down and think. Put your bow where you were sitting, then go to the exact spot that you shot your animal. Make sure there's blood. Now turn your back to your bow, and look directly in line with where you shot. Your bolt will be down that line somewhere. It's a great help to find your bolt. Judging the blood on the bolt is a great way to tell where you made the shot, and how clean a kill it will be. So walk that line carefully, your bolt may have travelled some distance, or may be stuck into a tree, a deadfall, stump or the ground. You should never shoot up a hill unless you know that the bolt (bullet applies here as well!) will not clear the hill. I've learned the hard way to not use yellow, green and orange fletching in the fall. It's almost impossible to find your bolt afterwards in the leaves! Walk that line, look under the leaves, under downed trees, in the branches of downed trees etc. Look everywhere. Spend up to an hour, your animal has to die, give it time, spend it looking for your bolt.

What does the blood on the bolt mean?

You found your bolt! Congratulations! The odd one does get lost, but most of the time with a little perserverence they can be found. So there's blood on it. What does this tell you? Well, bright red blood smearing the feathers and the shaft tells you a couple of things. First you have a through and through. Second, it's bright red, that's either lung, both lungs or lung and heart. How much is there? Is it just a light streaking on the shaft and feathers? Then it's a good lung shot. Is the shaft pretty much coated and coming off on your hands in quantities you can see? It might be a heart shot. If it's a liver shot then the blood will be a darker red colour, not bright red, but more the colour if you cut your own finger. Are there little air bubbles on the shaft? This is a sure indication of a lung shot. This is what you want to see. Bubbles are good news. This might sound weird, but smell the bolt. Does it stink? And by stink I mean high, sweet, fermenting kind of smell? If so, and the shaft is red but also a bit of greenish colour to it, then it's a gut shot. Be prepared with this kind of shot for a long day. These are not the shots you want. This means that you shot too far back or that the animal was quartering towards you, a shot you do not want to take if you can help it. Sometimes animals "jump the string", this is where they seem to hear the shot before you take it, and jump suddenly forward. There's not much you can do about that, except accept the fact you will be tracking your animal some distance. Blood on the bolt is excellent. A stinky bolt, not so good. Bright red and bubbles, excellent. Okay, so now where is the deer?

Tracking your deer:

Get back to where you shot the animal. There should be blood on the ground there, or at least blood within a foot or two. Blood spots can tell you lots. First, blood drops splatter. If the animal is moving forward the blood spot will have splatters to the front-it always splatters in the direction the animal is moving. If you've got a good lung/heart shot you will probably follow this trail right to the animal within 50 yards. If you are in grass, corn or other tall stuff, check the stems and leaves as well as the ground for blood.

Animals will brush things as they start losing their balance. The trail will be very heavy if its a good shot, with blood drops visible every foot or so. If you get to the point where you see a drip here and there and then lose the trail, start walking circles from the last drop. Mark the last blood with something visible-your coat, your bow, a bolt with bright feathers, anything so you don't lose it. Keep walking circles out from that point, crossing the incoming trail. Be careful not to step in the blood while you track, or you will get it on your shoes, and then you'll have blood everywhere rubbing off your shoes. Eventually you will find more blood. Mark it, retrieve your gear and do it all again. Sometimes you will see large "throw ups" of blood. This is a good sign of either a lung or a gut shot. The animal will cough up blood in these cases. Most likely there are mortal wounds. Keep going as long as you find blood. When you don't, keep going in circles. More than likely your animal ran out of blood and then went another 10 yards and dropped. They will run into the thorniest, thickest stuff around, and usually at the bottom of a hill. Although, there are always exceptions to the rules! Be patient, follow the blood and you will get there. Don't be fooled by red spots on leaves. Check them to make sure they're blood. Sure fire way to tell-lick the end of your finger and then rub it. Does the spot come off? If so, it's blood. If not, it's just a red circle on a leaf. It's very easy to be fooled by colour on leaves, especially at night. Now, if you do shoot something and it gets dark, don't leave it until the morning. Chances are you'll get beat out by the coyotes or wild dogs. Use a good white light flashlight. Don't bother buying one of those "blood" lights. They don't work very well and eat batteries really fast. A good LED white light and spare batteries are all you need. Perservere. It will be out there and you can find it.

Okay, so you found your deer. Now what?

Gutting your deer:

ALWAYS APPROACH A DOWNED ANIMAL FROM ITS BACK!!!!!! This is very important. If the animal is not dead, you will scare it up and you don't want to be near those hooves. Injured animals are dangerous. Poke it. Make sure it's not breathing before you approach it. **MAKE SURE IT'S DEAD.**

This is where the fun begins. Your animal is dead. Its down. You found it. This is half the battle. Now prepare to get, literally, up to your elbows. First thing. Take a good look at it. They're beautiful animals. Touch the coat, appreciate it for what it is, they live in them year round without getting cold. Look at the face, the eyes will stay open. That's normal. Also the tongue will stick out of the mouth. There will usually be lots of blood draining from the nose and mouth. Again, normal. But, it will shock you. Did you notice that deer don't have top teeth? **TAG YOUR ANIMAL** as per law. Be careful. You'll still be shaking, don't cut yourself as you notch your tag. Cut out the time (hour), day, and month then peel the paper on the back. Wrap around the base of an antler (buck) OR through a slit in the ear on a doe. Instructions are printed on the back of the tag itself.

Okay, in about an hour from a bow shot the stomach will begin to bloat. This is normal because of the bacteria living in there. You don't want any of that bacteria getting out. That is your number one priority thought at this point. When you gut an animal you want as much to stay intact as possible. You will probably have problems with your first, it's okay. Use your nose! It will tell you if you've nicked anything. Honestly, I don't bother tying off the gut or anything. Just be careful and quick and it's not a problem.

Flip the animal so its lying mostly on its back. It will not stay in this position. Prop it if you want, but easier is to stand over the animal's stomach and wrap the back leg that is not on the ground around your leg (see 2nd photo next page). You will be making a cut from the bottom of the rib cage, in the midline of the animal all the way to just above the pelvic bone. Before you do this, feel it out with your fingers first to see exactly what it feels like and where to cut from-to. Feel for the sternum-rib cage. Follow to the bottom of the ribcage in the midline. You'll feel where the bone ends. Then feel between the back legs for the pelvic bone. If the deer is a buck you'll have a fairly simple straight line cut. If it's a doe, well, you'll have to cut around the udder and remove that. This was a doe. A buck will have a penis and testicles just under the skin, depending on where you are, you may need to leave a testicle for identification. Usually though, this is used for moose. I'm going to assume that you do not need to leave anything on the carcass, like here in SW ontario. As you can see in that photo, you want to make a **VERY SHALLOW** cut from the sternum

(bottom of the ribcage) down to that pelvic bone. Cut around the penis or udder. You will need to remove these parts during the course of this cut. They do not extend into the body cavity, however a major blood vessel supplies the penis and the udder and will need to be cut. Cut around the udder/penis and then follow the connective tissue (white stringy type stuff) to remove it. Now, don't be timid. Cutting takes force and a bit of strength. The animal is not going to mind. Just watch your fingers and don't cut too deep! You can remove these later as you make your deeper cuts, but you do want them out of the way sooner than later.



1. Find the sternum, start your cut over the bone. Don't just plunge your knife in, there's stuff in there you don't want to cut. Go slow the first couple of times, the first cut is the hardest. Once you are familiar with the way it feels and looks it will go faster.



2. Notice how the back leg is held back by the person's leg? This makes it much easier, it stops the deer from rolling back on its side and keeps both your hands free for the other work. The udder is the pinker part between the back legs. The udder tissue actually extends down to where the legs come back out from the body, the cut to remove the udder will be a big circle into the hip creases.



3. There are several layers of tissue. The hair, the skin, the subdermis (that's the beigish layer you can see in this photo near the bottom of the photo near the rib cage), muscle (dark red), fascia (the greyish stuff just under the thumb in the photo-with muscle around it). Under this fascia is another layer of muscle and then the guts.



4. Once you are through the layers of muscle and fascia you can slide your fingers into the cavity to prevent cutting any of the guts. Just don't cut your fingers by accident here!

So you don't cut the stomach on the first deer, since you've never seen or done this before, go one layer of tissue at a time. Do this your first time. After you are familiar with the cutting and pressure and where you are in the skin you can actually make a cut right into the cavity through the skin, the 2 layers of muscle and the layer of really tough connective tissue. But save this for your second gutting.

Okay, now you've cut all the way to the pelvis, you have removed the penis/udder. You make that one last gentle cut and something big, whitish green and covered with veins starts pushing through the opening. This is the stomach. This is one thing you do not want to cut. Get your free hand in there, the one without the knife and keep pushing down (not too hard, you can rupture it), enough to keep it out of the way of your knife.



5. See the stomach? It's that greenish round part coming up through the cut. The line on it is a large blood vessel. There are many blood vessels all over the stomach. With a bow shot (this was a gun shot deer) this stomach would be bigger and bloated and pushing out through the cut. Just hold it out of the way of the knife with your hand/fingers. Notice how my husband is using his fingers to make sure he doesn't cut anything. The intestines lie just below (towards the hind legs) the stomach. Continue this cut into the abdominal cavity until you go all the way down to the pelvic bone.



6. So here you can see the stomach really well (the round greenish organ with all the veins on it). Up above that between the stomach and the hind leg are intestines. The reddish stuff is some of the hind quarter meat. Notice how all the guts seem to go deeper inside down near that muscle.

The next task is a bit weird the first time you do it. you want to get between the back legs under the tail and grab the skin on both sides of the anus (buck), or anus and vaginal opening and urethral opening (doe). This should pinch the holes shut, so nothing should “leak” out. Pull them away from the animal, then the make a DEEP cut all around them. Cut in the skin with fur on it, not the naked skin close to the openings. You should scrape bone all the way around them. Go as deep as you can-deep being into the animal, not down towards the back, you want your knife angled as though you were going to skewer the deer from the butt to the head, so you are cutting inside the pelvic bone (front), legs (sides) and the spine (back). What you are doing is cutting around the large intestine/rectum and all the other organs (vagina and urethra in the doe too) to loosen them from the animal so you can pull them forward into the abdominal cavity.



7. The hole closest to the hand/tail is the anus. This being a doe, the slit like hole below it in the vagina. The urethral opening is the dark little spot to the right (the belly side) of the vaginal slit. You want to cut around these.



8. Pulling them away from the animal helps get the knife deep around them. There's bone on all sides, don't worry if you cut into some meat at this point with your first animal. You'll get the hang of it as you do more.

So now that everything is free from the body on that end, go back to the abdominal cavity and pull (gently) by grabbing everything you can as close to where you just cut by reaching through under the pelvic bone from the abdomen side. This should be between 8 and 12 inches deep-so be prepared to get up half way to your elbow at this point. Work your fingers around the inside of the bones to pull away any connective tissue that may be holding things in place. If it doesn't pull forward easily, get back in the back end and see what you missed. Once it's free and you pulled it forward into the abdomen, keep pulling it all out away from the body onto the ground. You do not want any of the feces that are in the rectum and large intestines from getting into the abdominal cavity. If you do spill some, carefully scoop all the pellets out. Make sure that you get them all. Next is the really messy part. Pull the stomach out of the cavity as far as you can. It won't come far, because everything going towards the head end is still attached. Get your hand up under the rib cage inside and feel around. You will feel a sheet of tissue that extends across the entire animal. That is the diaphragm. Cut it completely around the animal as close to the rib cage as possible. If you made a good lung shot you will have a lot of blood rush into the abdomen-it was trapped up in the chest by the diaphragm. Sounds gross, but watch your feet. A deer has a lot of blood, and it will come out all over your feet unless you move them a bit away.



9. Lift out the stomach.

Once you've cut the diaphragm and let as much blood drain as you can, reach up into the chest again. You will feel something slippery and smooth on the animal's right side (your left), that's the liver. It is a huge organ and goes about half way across the chest. Then above that towards the head you'll find some squishy feeling tissue. This is the lung. They lie on either side of the chest, just like in a human. On the left side of the animal the hard triangular shaped thing is the heart. Reach past all of that. You may need to do a bit of pulling and tearing and working your fingers around to get up as far as you can to the neck of the animal. Find the trachea. It will be a round tube, about 1.5 inches in diameter with hard rings around it. The rings are cartilage. Reach as far up that as you can, use your forearm to push everything (liver, lungs, heart) out of the way, bring your knife up with your other hand (don't stab yourself-you have to go blade first, there won't be room to turn your knife around in there) to the hand that is up the chest, and cut through the trachea. Cut everything up there. There will be more blood as there is a huge blood vessel in the back of the animal there from the heart. You should literally be up to your elbows in the deer. Now, grab the cut end of the trachea and pull as hard as you can down out of the chest cavity. The lungs, heart and most of the liver should follow. If they don't, figure out where it's attached, cut through that with your knife as close to the body wall as you can, and in one big motion pull everything out and away from the animal. The stomach, intestines, liver, lungs, heart etc should all come out as one piece if everything has gone well.



10. Pull everything out in one big pull.

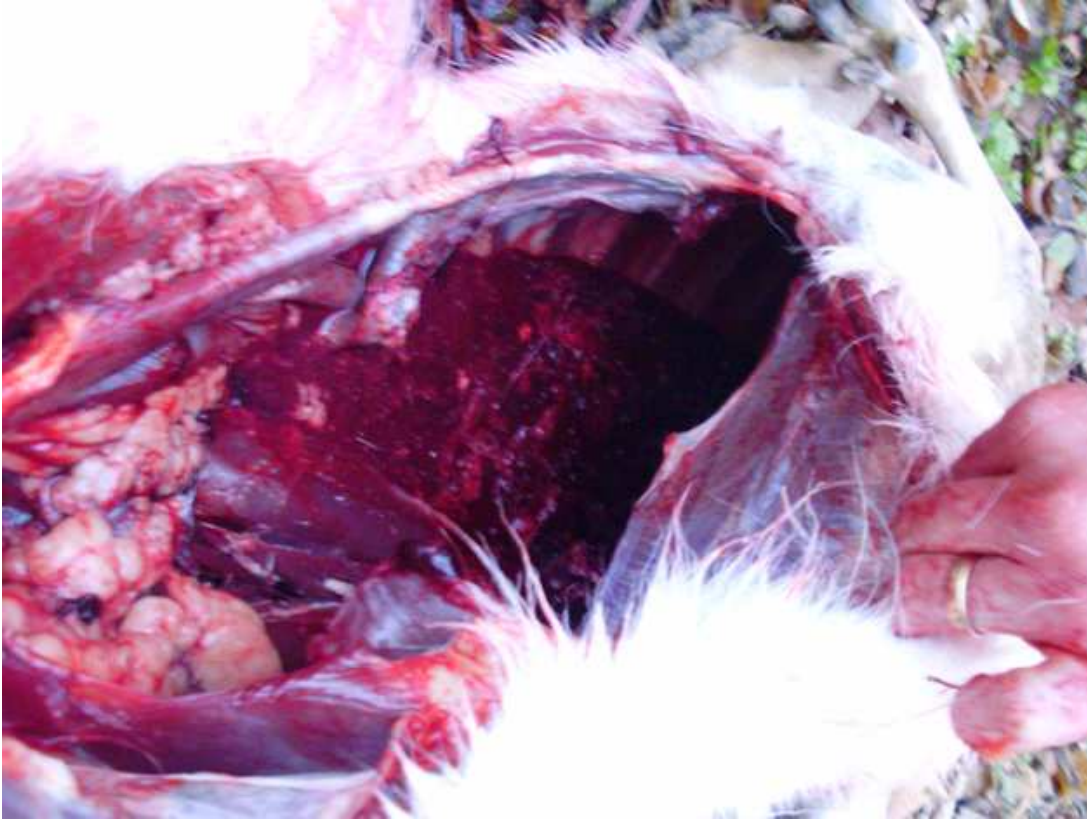


11. Remember to pull it far away from your deer. Leave this in the bush away from any travelled areas. The coyotes will clean it up in no time at all. It will weigh about 10-15 pounds, so don't be surprised by the weight. It's heavy and awkward.



12. From right to left. Pink tissue that looks like it's made up of segments are the lungs. Below that with the white band around the top of it, smooth triangular is the heart. The dark reddish thing in the middle of the photo is the liver. Above and to the left is the stomach, below (to the bottom of the photo) the stomach is small intestine-these are contained in some fascia (connective tissue). This being a doe, you can see the uterus just to the left of the liver with the red roundish bit and the pink around it. The round bown thing on top of the intestine is a feces pellet so you know what they look like-much like the feces they leave on the ground.

Okay, now look inside the abdomen. It will be full of blood. (photo next page)



13. The whitish stuff to the left is all fat. The tenderloin (the most tender piece of meat) can be seen as the linear muscle running to the right of the fat. All that red chunky stuff is blood. It will be clotting, so don't be surprised if it's got lumps and is really slimy.

Roll your deer onto its side. This part is a little tricky. You don't want to get leaves and dirt on the open cavity. As you roll it, pick it up a little so the blood will drain out. If you roll the deer away from you, you can grab handfuls of the hair/skin up near the shoulders to help you lift. Drain the blood from the abdominal cavity. Now take a look in. See if there are any round red organs left inside. Sometimes the kidneys do not come out with the rest. They are about half the size of your fist, one on the left, one on the right and lie against the lower ribs in the back of the animal. Just pull them out if they are there.

Congratulations! You've just gutted your first deer.

Now, pack it all up in your ATV/truck and phone your butcher and off you go!

If you decide to butcher your own deer it will take you between 3 and 5 hours. Closer to 5 the first time. It's a lot of work, and if you don't have a shed or garage to do it in (blood will stain a concrete floor so make sure your floor is sealed first!) I would recommend a butcher. Just call ahead and warn them you will be bringing in a deer during your season and then call them once you have one to take. Most smaller abattoirs will butcher deer. Just check around in your area. If you do want to butcher your own deer, that will have to be the subject of another pdf as I didn't take all the photos of that. It was too warm and we needed to get the meat into the freezer really quickly.

But basically the steps are: Hang the deer so the head is just off the ground; skin the deer; wash thoroughly with potable water (garden hose works great with a sprayer on the end); get all the hair, dirt, anything not deer off the deer; then cut the meat off from the bottom (head end) working your way up the carcass. This would be much easier to show you than to describe. But, the meat cuts are generally following the natural lay of the muscles. Muscles are bundled into groups, and most of the time that is the cut.

Well, hope this helps you with your first deer. I'm going to keep your phone number handy, we still have another tag, so if we fill that one this season and it's a weekend day, we'll let you know. Don't worry if you mess anything up the first time. It's a learning curve, and the first time is always the worst. Good luck, happy hunting! Please let me know if there's any questions!

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