



Wet Scrape Brain Tanning

by Natalie Bogwalker

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Text by Natalie Bogwalker and Tyler Lavenburg; photos by Taylor Hellhake and DEPTHink Productions and Natalie Bogwalker; drawings by Natalie Bogwalker and Summer Gibson.



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Dear reader,

Welcome to the world of brain tanning! This ancient art has enriched my life tremendously and I hope it does the same for you. When I first walked through the woods wearing buckskin, I felt as though I was truly a part of the wild. May the instruction in this ebook lead you to a similar sense of deep connection and belonging in the natural world.

I began my study and practice of hide tanning more than 15 years ago. Back then, I was living off-the-grid at the remote Wild Roots community. During that time, I got almost addicted to tanning hides. Along with foraging and natural building, brain tanning was an integral part of my “return” to the wilderness and my introduction to earthskills.

Learning how to turn deer hides into soft, supple, infinitely useful buckskin brought me a deep sense of contentment. After growing up in the suburbs and searching for meaning in our modern culture, I finally felt interwoven with something real and fulfilling. Not to mention, I made myself a beautiful, badass wardrobe of durable, attractive clothes, bags, shoes, and more.

Since then, I’ve taught hundreds of students the ancient art of brain tanning. In fact, I founded my school, Wild Abundance, in order to share the empowerment that I feel when I tan hides and practice other earthskills.

I’m very excited about this ebook and our [online brain tanning class](#). Mainly because they’re our newest steps toward sharing these skills with a wider audience. Even though we love seeing our students’ faces and teaching in-person, not everyone can make it to Asheville to take a class. So, here’s our step-by-step instruction on how to brain tan a deer hide at home, wherever you are.

My hope is that these new resources will support you to feel connection with nature and a deeper part of yourself...and to make beautiful buckskin that you can turn into many cool and useful things.

Wildly yours,

Natalie Bogwalker
Founder, Director
Wild Abundance, LLC

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Wet Scrape Brain Tanning



Hide tanning can be a family affair

Here's your guide to the wet scrape method of brain tanning. In it, we'll walk you through all the details of how to successfully brain tan a deer hide. Brain tanning is a nuanced skill, and it takes some practice to get really good at it. For best results, read this book as a companion to one of our brain tanning classes.

We offer one hands-on, in-person brain tanning class every November at Wild Abundance, near Asheville, NC. For those of you who don't live nearby, check out our [Online Brain Tanning Class](#).



1. Materials

This is an awesome basic list for hide tanning; for an extremely detailed list, check out our [Online Brain Tanning Class](#)

- Deer hide– fresh, salted, frozen or dried
- Scraping beam– made from scraped and smoothed hardwood log or PVC pipe, in combination with some sort of propping device
- Scraper– dulled-down planer blade with handles of hose or a combo of fabric and duct tape
- Rubber apron or a large garbage bag and belt
- Plastic bucket
- Good sharp knife– preferably carbon steel as it is easier to keep sharp
- Brains– one deer brain is just enough, but more is better; if you buy pig brains, get a pound; a dozen egg yolks will work in place of the brains, but brains are slightly superior
- 1/4 cup olive oil or rendered bear fat
- Staking post
- 5-foot length of 1/8-inch thick steel cable and 2 cable clamps
- Strong, or ready-to-be-strong arms
- Three beading needles
- Wringing beam setup– a pole lashed to 2 trees works well
- Wringing pole– a strong, smooth stick of very hard wood, 2 to 3 inches in diameter and 3 to 5 feet in length; broken tool handles work well for this
- Five to 15 gallons of evenly punky wood, or a combination of punky wood and fir boughs

2. Evaluating and Trimming a Hide

Brain tanning a hide is no joke. The process requires a lot of physical exertion, persistence and dedication. Because of this, it's important to make sure that the hide that you are about to tan was prop-

erly skinned and that you properly trim it. This will ensure that you get the maximum reward of usable magically soft hide for minimum effort (which will still be pretty hard work).



Evaluating a hide to see what should be trimmed. Trimming early in the process can save a lot of work.

It's pretty common for both hunters and meat processors to cut into the hide when they remove the hide from the deer. You can ask if the hide was "pulled off" or "cut off." Likely some combination of these two techniques was used to get the hide off,

but what you want is a hide that was mostly "pulled off." You don't want any cuts going into the skin itself as these lacerations are likely to cause holes in the hide when tanning.



Some hunters and butchers use a knife not only for making initial cuts, but to assist in peeling the hide off. This can result in knife marks, which can later become holes.

As you inspect the hide, you can usually tell if this happened because there will be knife marks that penetrate into a grey depth in the hide. Sometimes you can't tell until after a hide has already been fleshed.

When trimming a hide, you remove parts that are particularly hard to tan and that yield pieces that are not particularly useful. This is best accomplished before or during the fleshing process, as there is no reason to put extra work into processing parts of the hide that are destined to be cut off.

We generally cut off excess skin on the neck, legs and tail. It is a bit of a subtlety

Remove parts of the hide that will be particularly hard to tan:
excess skin on the neck,
legs and tail.

to know how much to cut off, because if you take off too much, then you end up with a smaller amount of useful material, which is counterproductive. A good rule of thumb for the legs is to cut off any narrow "peninsulas." As for the neck, we like to leave between 1 and 4 inches beyond where the neck extends past the shoulders.

3. Fleshing

Place the hide on the beam flesh-side-up with the neck of the hide at the upper end of the beam. Pinch the hide against the beam with your pelvis. Scrape off flesh using your scraper. Make sure to only scrape a small amount at a time, moving the hide around in order to always be scraping only at the ideal sweet spot on the beam—in the center of the beam about 2 to 6 inches down the beam from the upper end. Your back and the hide will thank you. Be sure not to allow the scraper to slide from side to side. Make sure to keep the hide flat on the beam, avoiding folds. Both of these problems can create holes. Scrape flesh off the main body; then turn the hide to scrape the neck.

At this point the hide can be dried (see *Part 7: Drying* for more on properly drying a hide), or you can continue with the next step (*Soaking*). If you are in a hurry, you can skip ahead to *Scraping*.

If you choose to dry your hide at this point, beware of hide beetles if you leave the hair on the hide for more than a few months. Hair will make it much more likely for these nefarious creatures to infest your hide. A combination of diatomaceous earth and borax sifted onto both sides of your hide—along with moving your hide around every few months—will help prolong the time until infestation but will not prevent it. The best way to prevent it is to use the hide frequently in everyday life. You can use it as a mat, but make sure that you pick it up every few days. Be aware that hair-on



Fleshing the hide is an important step before soaking, graining and membraning.

deer hides shed much more than a sheepskin, coyote hide or other “fur.” Deer hair is hollow and therefore breaks and sheds much more than fur or wool.

4. Soaking

The process of scraping the hair and the grain layers (which is no easy task) will be much easier if you soak your hide either in water or in a lye solution. To prepare your hide in water, soak the hide in clean water in a bucket or stream just until the hair starts to slip (that is, comes out easily with a firm tug). Make sure that the hide



Putting hide mats into bins to soak

is weighted down with a rock so it is completely submerged.

Be sure to tether your hide to a tree, rock, or the like if soaking in a creek. Soaking should take 2 to 4 days in water temps above 70°F and may be prolonged for up to a few weeks in water temperatures below 50°F. Make sure to agitate the hide once a day if in a bucket or barrel, as this will make sure that the “retting” (controlled rot that makes the grain much easier to scrape effectively) is even.

I generally start soaking it outside in a creek and then remove the hide from the creek and put in a bucket of water weighted down with rocks, bring it inside and set it next to the woodstove or out in the sun (if temperatures are above 55°F) for

12 to 48 hours before I want to scrape it. You might put the bucket in your bathtub if you don’t have a woodstove or area in your house where a bucket with a slightly stinky hide would be welcome. The bucket in the bathtub can be especially helpful because it is a great place to add warm water to your hide. Don’t put the hide directly in the bathtub because hair will likely clog your drain, and your bathtub might become a place where you won’t want to submerge your own skin. You’ll know the hide is ready to scrape when the hair pulls out easily with a firm tug.

Soak your hide until the hair “slips” (comes out easily with a firm tug): 2-4 days in water temperatures above 70°F; up to 3 weeks in water temperatures below 50°F.

There are other ways to do this which involve using chemically basic solutions. I don’t do this myself because I retained a fairly serious chemical burn on my belly from using a wood ash solution.

However, Tyler Lavenburg, one of my former students, nearly always prepares his hides in a lye solution. Tyler has been working hides since his first class with me in 2009, and now he’s an accomplished hide tanner and excellent teacher himself. You’ll find his instructions for using lye to “buck” hides below. Note that Tyler almost exclusively uses commercial lye

in this process. If you would like to learn how to do it with wood ashes, please refer to Matt Richards's section on bucking in his book *Deerskins into Buckskins*. Tyler explains how to use potassium hydroxide to "buck" or prepare your hide.



Potassium hydroxide

5. Bucking, by Tyler Lavenburg

Preparing hides in lye, or "bucking" as it is most often called, is the process of chemically retting the hide in a highly alkaline solution in effort to slip (remove) the hair and raise the grain layer. If you have ever scraped a deer hide to make buckskin, then you know that removing the grain layer can be arduous and deceptive. It is a layer that can take many forms and be highly variable in how willing it is to be removed. So, bucking is a method that I have adopted for preparing all my hides for these and several other reasons. Aside from raising the grain layer and encouraging the hair to slip much more easily, it also begins to break down the mucous

membranes in the hide – which makes for easier softening. If you are careful in how you handle the hide throughout the process of bucking, you should be safe and free of chemical burns.

I use a commercial lye product called potassium hydroxide. I purchase it from a soap-maker's supply on the Internet. For years, I used sodium hydroxide, which came in the form of a drain-cleaning product called Red Devil Lye; it's no longer sold on the shelves at grocery stores due to its toxicity. I know it can seem like a scary endeavor to decide to expose yourself to a substance with a skull and crossbones on it, but as you will see in my recipe, you will be diluting it a lot and using protective gear such as gloves and an apron while scraping.

However you get your hide to this place, you want it to be free of salt and at least partially hydrated, and you want to look ahead to set aside time to scrape your hide in three days. I typically buck multiple hides at once, which is the way you might work in the future; but for beginners, just start with one hide.

You should use a tote bucket (at least 15 gal.) and fill it about half-full of cold water. Add one heaping capful of lye flakes (approx. $\frac{1}{2}$ oz. in weight) per hide to the water. If the hides are particularly large, I use 1- $\frac{1}{2}$ capfuls of the dried lye flakes, or approximately $\frac{3}{4}$ oz. in weight. Either way, you want to add this amount per hide about to go in solution, stirring the flakes into the water very well before adding the hides.

To make lye solution

Fill a large (15+ gallon) plastic tote half-full with cold water. Add one heaping capful (approx. ½ oz) of lye (potassium hydroxide) flakes for medium-sized hides. Stir the flakes in very well to dissolve. When the water looks cloudy and almost soapy, you are ready to add your hide.

I typically check the potency of the lye water by sticking my hand in the water and feeling for how slippery it feels; this is the test of strength. After touching the lye bath, I always immediately wash my hands with cold water and I am fine. I have never even gotten close to a chemical burn this way.

The water should look slightly cloudy and almost soapy. You are now ready to add your hides to the solution and stir them well. I typically weight them down with a rock and stir them with a stick each day – checking how well the hair pulls from the skin each day. In our mild temperatures in the Southeastern mountains, it pretty reliably takes three days for the hair to slip and the grain layer to raise. If you are attempting this in much colder climates,

you will want to keep your solution indoors somehow.

Once the hair is slipping easily all around the hide, you are ready to scrape. When you scrape a hide that has been bucked with lye, you'll want to wear rubber gloves and an apron to keep your skin away from direct contact with the hide. The lye solution is pretty weak at this point, so don't fear accidentally touching your hide. Just wash your hands in cold water soon after and rinse them in a light vinegar solution to help re-neutralize your skin.

Note: After you're done scraping your hide, it will still be slightly alkaline. This means you need to bring the skin back to neutral. Typically I just put the hide in a running creek overnight; the same thing can be accomplished by constantly running a hose at very low pressure through a 10 gallon tote, though this is quite wasteful of water. You are welcome to experiment with all sorts of old methods of re-neutralizing, such as fermented bran, sour brains, urine, a very weak vinegar bath, etc. The idea is that the hide is alkaline after bucking and thus you can add an acid to the system to bring it back to neutral. The only challenge with this is that sometimes you can then take the hide too far on the acid side of the scale and have to try again to re-neutralize. Just remember what the hide felt like while it was hydrated before bucking. That is what you are going for.

6. Scraping



Scraping hides together is a great way to get to know someone.

Scrape off hair and grain, which holds in the hair. It's easy to tell when you have removed the hair. It can be quite challenging to understand the subtle difference between removing the grain and not removing the grain. This is one of the main reasons why it is helpful to take a class, either in-person or online. We certainly highly recommend the Wild Abundance courses, especially our [Online Brain Tanning Course](#).

In order to get your groove on with scraping, we recommend starting somewhere

in the middle of the hide. Work on a small patch, going over it many times, making sure that you remove absolutely all of the grain.

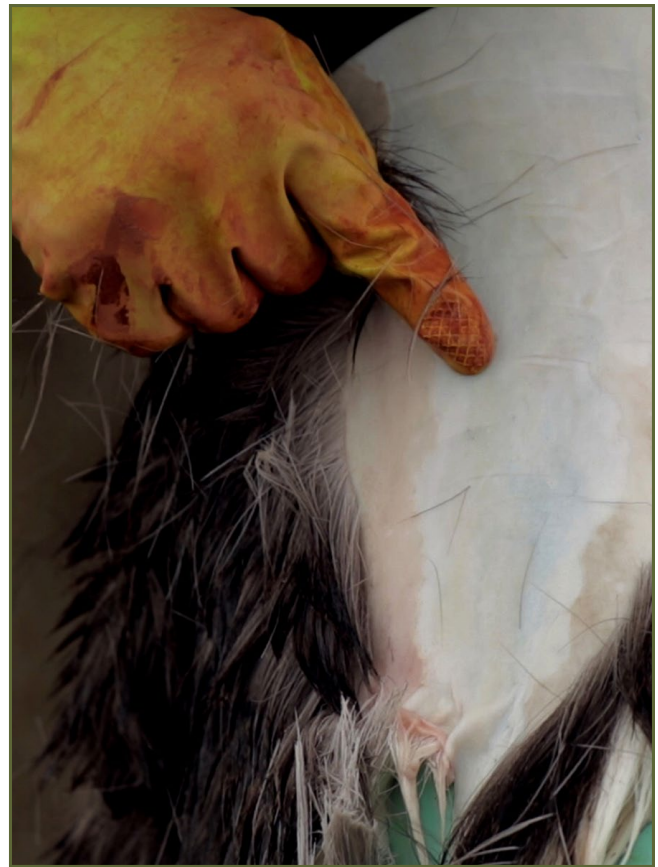
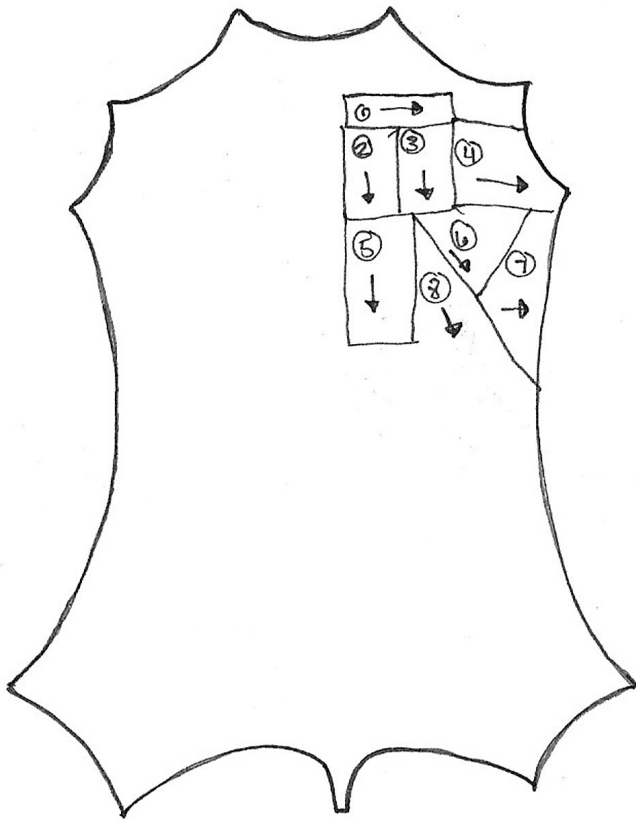
Now that you have gotten your groove on, you may start by scraping a one- or two-inch swath horizontally across the hide about 6 to 8 inches down from the end of the neck, which should take you into the shoulder area. This will give you some bite when you start scraping with the hair. It is much easier to scrape with the direction of the hair.

Tips for making sure that you remove all of the grain

- Listen for a rough sound as you are scraping.
- Make sure you overlap your strokes, as you would when mowing a lawn.
- Observe the hide's texture after you scrape. The grain is shiny; the hide is not.
- Don't pay attention to color, which tends to indicate the moisture level of the hide rather than the presence of grain or lack thereof.
- Whenever possible, scrape from where there is no grain into where there is grain; this will allow you to get under the grain as you work. It will also make it a lot easier to scrape.
- The best way to tell that you have scraped off all the grain is that nothing else will come off if the hide is still wet. *(We have had one student in 10 years of teaching hundreds of students hide tanning take off too much of the hide during this step, but if you keep the hide wet, it is incredibly unlikely.)*



The grain can be hard to identify on your own without guidance.



Next, scrape small portions below your initial line. The edges are difficult, and don't be too concerned if you make a few holes close to the legs or belly. Remember that people who dry-scrape lose about a half an inch all around the hide. Oh, those poor dry-scrapers, at this point they would still be building their frame or lashing their hide to the frame.

If you can make yourself triangles, such as shown at #8 in the diagram, you will reap many rewards. Scrape one side and then the other, or proceed with any systematic system. If you think that you are too wild to be systematic (as I did with my first couple of wet scrapes), you may find yourself disappointed when you realize that you have missed a lot of grain. The result is off-colored and shiny patches in your



It can be super helpful to set yourself up with "triangles" to increase efficiency of scraping grain.

finished product. Be thorough, be vigilant; grain can play disappearing acts on you. Every hide is different, and on some, the grain is difficult to see.

If you see dark lines about 1-inch wide developing perpendicular to your direction of scraping, do not fear; this is simply a spot where there is less moisture than the parts around it. It was probably where your scraper entered or exited a stroke.

Again, this is where it really pays off to make sure you remove the grain and the hair at the same time. If you remove only the hair and not the grain before moving onto a new section, it is much more difficult to go back over your work looking for grain.

Finally, after you have scraped the body to the edges, turn the hide around and scrape the neck. This should be the only



Scraping can become a rather obsessive task. While many are tempted to scrape via headlamp or headlight, know that it is very hard to see the grain, and you will likely miss a lot if you attempt to scrape at night.



Only after the rest of the hide is scraped do we turn the hide around and scrape against the grain of the hair.



Scraping can be exhausting, but it sure is rewarding!

time that you are scraping against the direction of the hair. This is the hardest part, but remember, you are almost done!

If you bucked your hide, make sure to neutralize it at this time, even if you are just drying it. Refer to the *Bucking* section for instructions on re-neutralizing.

7. Drying (Optional)

At this point, the hide may be dried if you are like me (lazy) or overly attached to efficiency, which strangely sometimes are the same thing. You may, however, skip to membraning. Drying the hide and letting it age has many advantages. First is that this is an excellent stage in which to store a hide while waiting for better softening

weather. I obtain my hides during hunting season (autumn), and prefer to soften in the green season when the sun is stronger and the days are longer. A hide dried at this stage can be rolled into a scroll for easy storage. Drying at this stage also makes the hide easier to membrane when being rehydrated.

In order to dry it, you may tack the edges at 4- to 8-inch intervals with a hammer and nails on a southern-facing outdoor wall which has a good roof overhang. An easier method, which works on a sunny day, is to lay the hide flat on the hood of a car (not primitive, but quite practical). This method is especially awesome because the hide will be completely flat, which means that it will be exquisitely easy to roll into a scroll and store. In this



A car or truck hood can be extremely useful for drying a hair-off hide.

condition, make sure to store your hide in a plastic container (perhaps Tupperware) or in a mouse-proof location. I have had many a hide eaten by nefarious creatures (primarily mice) in the rawhide state. If you are feeling lazy and the day isn't sunny, you may simply throw your hide over a porch rail, rafter or tree branch. This totally works, but it will make your hide much more challenging to store.

8. Membraning

If your hide is dry, soak it until hydrated. This may take anywhere from 4 hours to 3 days. Make sure to start the soaking in warm water. You can soak it in soapy water, and then in a very weak vinegar solution for a few minutes, or in a fermented bran solution, or you may do incantations

while creating vortexes in the water with a cow horn. I don't know how much any of this matters. The main point is that you want to rehydrate your hide.

If you can do an alkaline bath and then an acidic neutralization, you may set yourself up for easier softening. Matt Richards came out with a second edition of his book, *Deerskins into Buckskins*, and added a section on acidifying prior to braining. This is a step that many tanners have adopted with the observed benefit of easier softening if the hide is slightly acidic before braining and wringing.

If you never dried your hide, please ignore my rantings and just start membraning. But before wringing, you still may want to consider soaking your hide in a very light vinegar solution (½ cup per 5 gallons water) for anywhere from 15 minutes to one



The membrane side of the hide, which used to have flesh, is generally more dirty looking than the grain side. The membrane itself fades into the hide, rather than there being a distinct layer like there is on the grain side.

Whether or not your hide was dried, it can be beneficial to soak it in a weak vinegar solution before membraning. Add ½ cup of vinegar to 5 gallons of water and soak for 15-60 minutes, or until the hide appears slightly swollen.

This step is optional.

hour. What you are looking for is the hide to be ever so slightly swollen. The skin will respond the same way as if it were in an alkaline solution, as when it is off-pH from neutral, the hide gets a bit rubbery, slippery and swollen. If you have over-acidified, the hide won't accept brains as well and thus you should put your hide

back in the creek to neutralize before braining. Playing with pH can be a tricky learning curve but will feel more natural in time.

To get started membraning, put your hide on your beam so the flesh side (sans flesh, or at this point you are going to have a very stinky hide) is up. Scrape, or simply abrade the membrane. Please follow my previous advice on systematic scraping. I have heard that something like more than 60% of brain penetration comes from the membrane side. Scraping off the membrane should only take you 45 minutes maximum (Digger, a hide guru out west says that it should only take 30 minutes, but he bucks his hides with lye, so I like to be a bit more thorough). Don't obsess, just make sure that you run the blade over

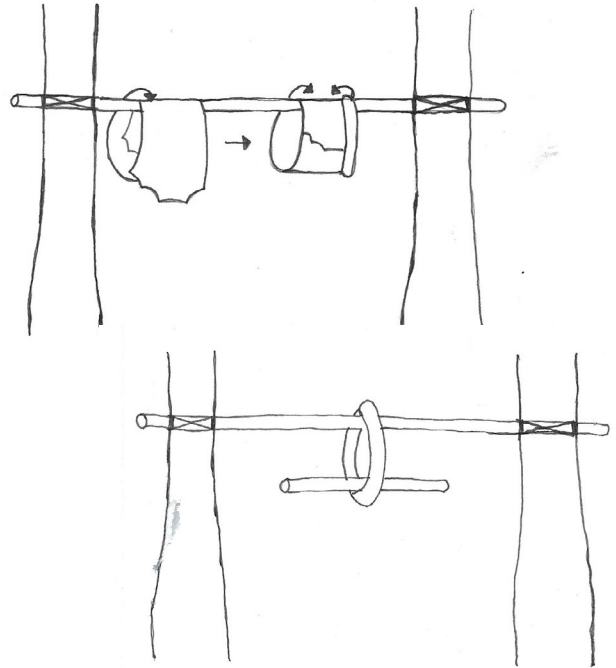


Make sure to scrape over the entire surface of the membrane side. Be thorough, but don't obsess, as the membrane layer blends into the body of the hide.

every inch of the hide so the sheet of membrane is well abraded. You aren't going to be able to remove every bit of membrane because it blends into the hide rather than being a distinct layer like the grain.

9. Wringing

Drape the hide over the wringing post—flesh side up, one-third of the length (the butt end) on one side and two-thirds (the neck end) on the other. Flip the two-thirds side over the top. Create a doughnut by rolling both sides toward center.



Hide tanning is for everyone.

Insert wringing stick into doughnut. Wring in one direction and then the other. Wring well, and you will be happy later. Turn your doughnut ¼ turn toward you, wring both ways, and then turn again. Repeat until you have wrung in both directions 4 times.

Open up the hide using a hide stake (we give clear directions for making one of these in our online class), work the hide in a horizontal direction until hide is “open,” or white. Don’t stress yourself too much at this stage. You will have plenty of opportunity to expend your energy later. Overall, what you are going for is to remove all the dark creases from wringing and get the hide nice and open. It will appear more white in color when opened.



A well-proportioned hide stake, made by one of my students

10. Braining

At this point, I am questioning the wisdom of making an ebook to which 300-plus-page books have been dedicated. Oh well...I think we are definitely laying a good groundwork, and you can always purchase our [Online Brain Tanning Class](#) if you want to go deeper.

Get the hide somewhat dry—but not too dry. It should be at a moisture level like a sponge that has been wrung out. It’s ideal if you don’t have wet spots, but make sure you don’t have hard dry spots. Lay out the hide in sun, and give it a stretch every once in a while as it is drying so it doesn’t get crunchy.



One deer brain, olive oil, and smoky water. Don't worry, we don't expect you to eat this.



An immersion blender can be very helpful, but a whisk or regular blender also works for mixing the brain solution.



Massage the brain solution into your hide.

Braining Solution Recipe

- 1.5 gallons of warm smokey water (soak a smoked hide or hide skirt in water if you happen to have one) or plain warm water. The water should be as warm as possible without burning your hand if you submerge it for 5 seconds.
- brains or egg yolks (amounts explained at beginning of this document)—whisked or blended into very small particles.
- ¼ cup olive oil, other oil or rendered animal fat from some animal (like duck or bear) that has relatively liquid fat at room temperature.

Make your braining solution in a clean 5-gallon bucket with a lid (see recipe). Put the hide in the solution. Touch it, massage it, stir it, do whatever seems best to you. Leave the hide in solution anywhere from 15 minutes to overnight.

Now, repeat the wringing and braining steps a total of 1-4 times depending on your patience, on the thickness and “toughness” of your hide, on the number of incantations that you spoke, and on how long that you aged your hide. You have probably found out by now that brain tanning is an intuitive as well as a stinky art. After your final wringing, I suggest employing a tip that I learned from Chuck Patrick, who has been tanning hides longer than I have been alive:

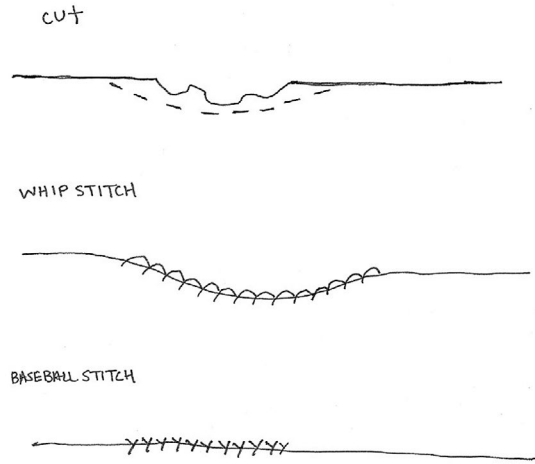


You don't need to carve your stake from an appropriately sized stump of a hardwood species. You can also add a carved or metal stake onto an inappropriately sized stump of the wrong species.

Chuck says to put your wrung, unopened hide in a plastic bag in your barn (or any relatively cool place with airflow) overnight, and then open up in the morning and continue on to softening. I have found this method to be highly useful for equalizing moisture and reducing softening time.

11. Softening

Open up the hide. This means stretch it sideways so that you open up the lines that developed in the wringing process.

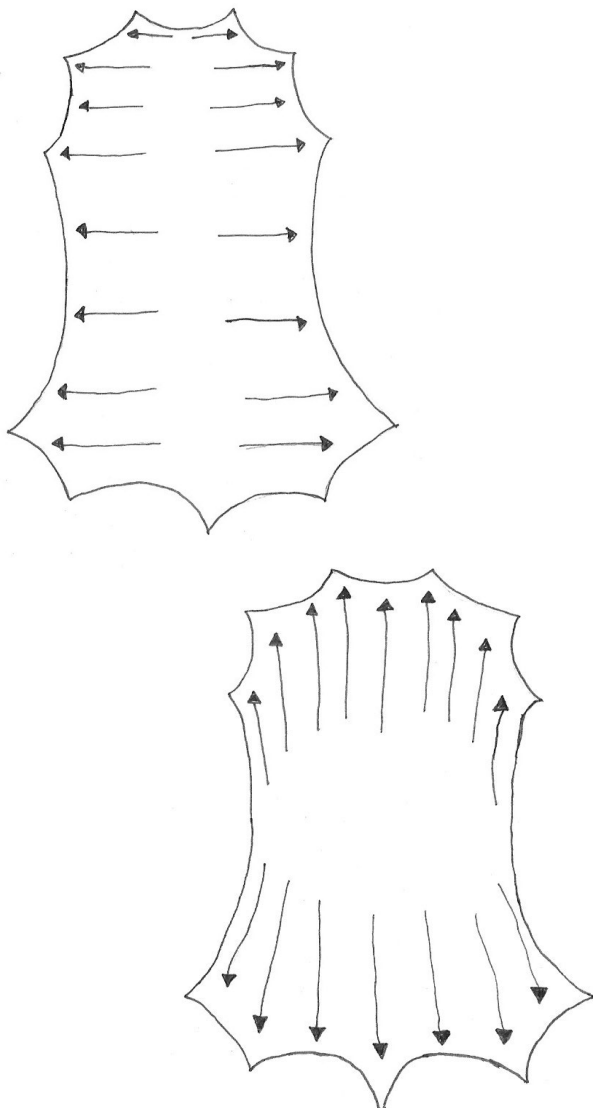


Sew up any holes that you want to close. Sewing holes is kind of a pain in the butt, and the holes are liable to open up again while cabling the hide, so if you don't mind a few holes in your finished product, you might prefer to skip this step. Only focus on holes that are further than 3 inches from the edge of hide (one of Digger's rules). In order to sew, you must first cut. Stretch the hide in such a direction that the hole is the skinniest, then fold at the hole. Cut on the dotted line shown in the diagram



with sharp (I do mean sharp!) scissors...I'm talking about those fancy fabric scissors that even your best friend won't let you use without permission. Sew up the holes using a whip stitch or baseball stitch (see diagram). Tie your ends with good knots (square, surgical or otherwise).

No granny knots. No tying the end of your thread in a knot and then commencing sewing, hoping that the knot won't pull through – it will. You need to engage the loose end and the active end of the thread together. Use beading thread, preferably the color of a smoked hide (beige) and a beading needle.



Now, pull on the hide. Pull it first in one direction down the length of the hide, then in the perpendicular direction. Work methodically, and don't forget your edges.

Softening Techniques

Stretching, cabling, staking, bouncing, rubbing, smacking

When we soften a hide, we are replacing the natural glues which exist between the fibers of the hide with oils (lecithin in the brains or egg yolks allows the fat to go into solution). This will allow the finished hide to be soft and flexible, rather than stiff like a rawhide drum head. (Who would want to wear rawhide as clothing... yuck!) In order to stop the glues in the hide from setting as the hide dries, we must keep the hide moving during the entire softening process. There are several methods to do this. You can stretch, cable, stake, bounce, rub, and smack the hide. As you develop your technique, you will realize that there are points during the softening process where it is beneficial to put the hide aside for a while to allow it to set, and then to "break" the fibers with a vigorous cabling.

For your first few hides, I recommend working your hide constantly until it is dry, going back and forth among the different techniques. In our [Online Brain Tanning Course](#), we spend a good amount of time demonstrating softening techniques as well as showing how to set up softening stations. Over time, you will work less and



less at this part of the process. All the stages leading up to softening are an effort to make this step easier. The better you prepare in all phases will make a big difference in how difficult your hide is to soften.

You can tell that your hide is dry in any given area when you pull it and it “bounces back” in that area. Some parts of the hide will take much longer to dry than other parts (for example, the neck, which is the thickest). Keep working the hide until all of it bounces back. Likely your edges will finish first. Don’t work the edges, or any other part after that particular part dries, or bounces back. This is a good time to shift your energies into other parts of the

hide. So you will go down the line checking off the boxes of each area: “edges? done ... mid-section? done ... butt cheeks? still wet ... neck? still wet.” Focus your work on the areas that are not yet dry. When all sections including neck, butt cheeks, and tail all bounce back on themselves, you finally are done! If you stop working when the neck or the butt cheeks (which take the longest to dry) still have moisture in them, they will stiffen up while the rest of the hide stays soft.

Congratulations, you are officially a badass braintanner!

Sew, glue or staple 2 softened hides to-

12. Smoking



Smoking with a friend can be great fun.

gether with the hair (or grain) sides facing each other.

Start making your hide bag by attaching both hides to each other or one hide to itself at the tails (or the place where the tails would be), and then work your way around both edges. It is helpful if both hides are approximately the same length. Make sure to leave the area around the necks open, and attach your hide skirt there.

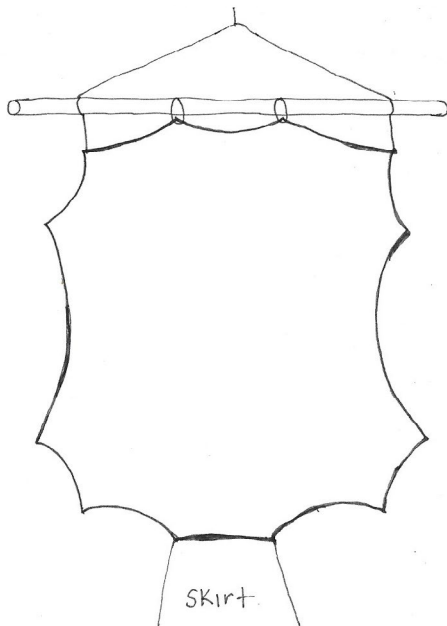
You have options for the location of your smoke source. You can dig a hole in the ground (a post-hole digger works well) or use a wood stove or a metal bucket with holes drilled in it so the fire can breathe. Whatever you use for holding your



Sometimes it takes a bit of encouragement for the last step.



Your hide bag will be much easier to work with and will function better if both hides are the same length.



Nice coals!

coals and punky wood, you should separately build a fire nearby and burn some hardwood that makes really good coals. Burn this fire until you have a healthy bed of coals, probably at least an hour. When your fire has burned down, transfer at least 8 cups of coals into your metal bucket or

Smoking a Hide

- Dig a hole or perforate a metal bucket or find an old wood stove to create your smoking setup
- Build a fire with nice hardwood
- Attach two softened hides together into a “pouch” with a canvas skirt, open at the tail end
- Transfer at least 8 cups hot coals from hardwood fire to smoking setup
- Add approximately 1 inch of dry, “punky” (half-rotten) wood to the fire
- Suspend hides above smokey fire, with skirt fit snugly above hole or around stovepipe or bucket
- Add small amounts of punk every 5 minutes or so
- When hide is appropriate color (evenly smokey), flip it over and smoke the membrane side (takes anywhere from 30 minutes to 5 hours, depending on weather and desired result)

hole in the ground, and suspend your hide over the coals, such that the hide skirt can be closed tightly above your hole, or above your stove pipe or metal bucket. I start with the hide bag closed, but after

you start to get a color that you like, you can open it up. To do this you may use thin sticks (like wooden chopsticks) inside your hide bag to prop the two hides apart.

Add crushed dry punky wood to coals. Punky wood is half-rotten wood. (During my younger years, I identified myself as a “punk.” It’s up to you to decide if I was “half-rotten.”) You want wood that is rotten enough that you can break it apart with your hands but not so rotten that it crumbles into dirt. You want punk wood that you process into quarter-golf ball sized pieces and which ideally is dry. Rotten wood in the Southeast is never really dry, so I gather about 50 gallons at a time and spread it all out on a big tarp in the sun and then store it in a closed con-



A shovel with holes drilled in it is even more effective at transferring coals.



It is important to break up your punk before adding it to your coals



Holes in hides can be effectively plugged up with punky wood or with clothes pins in order to make the smoke more effective.

tainer until I need to use it. If the punky wood is wet, it will drastically lengthen your smoking experience.

Add an inch or so of punky wood to your coal bed. Notice the level of smoke seeping through hides. There should be a lot of smoke. If there isn't, add more punk or other materials, stir and blow on it. Just don't let it flame up. If a very small flame starts, you can usually put it out by adding punky wood. This is really why you want to grade out your punky wood. If you use punk that is too "woody," it's more likely to flame up. It is also likely to flame up if there are pieces of heart of pine in your punk. Flames could destroy all your hard work in a heartbeat. The process will go



Make sure the smoke is actively billowing.

much better if you feed your coals small amounts of punk every 5 minutes or so.

Smoke the grain side for 30 minutes to 5 hours, until you have the color you desire. If it's a windy day, the smoking process can take much longer. If the hide is going to be worn heavily in all sorts of weather every day for years, you will want to smoke

and skirt inside out to smoke the membrane side. Smoke the membrane side of your hide(s) to desired smokiness. Again, the amount of smoke is up to you. You are almost done! Just make sure to keep moistening your skirt and that your hides don't scorch in the final moments.



You can see the color you have reached by peeking through a hole in the hide

it a fairly dark color. You want the smoke to penetrate through the hides to the outside. When you have the color and penetration that you want, turn the hide(s)



Reach up the hide skirt—make sure you have consent—to grab the two upper corners of the hide. Tease them through the skirt to flip the hide.





You are done! Congratulations!

Sources and Additional Resources:

Online Brain Tanning Course, an online course by Wild Abundance and Natalie Bogwalker

Deerskins into Buckskins by Matt Richards

Buckskin: The Ancient Art of Braintanning
by Steven Edholm and Tamara Wilder

Blue Mountain Buckskin: A Working Manual for Dry-Scrape Brain-Tan by Jim Riggs

www.braintan.com

Hide tanning can be hard to learn from a book, even our ebook.
Let us guide you through the process step by step!



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