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How to Preserve and Display Your Wildlife Harvest: Turkey and Deer

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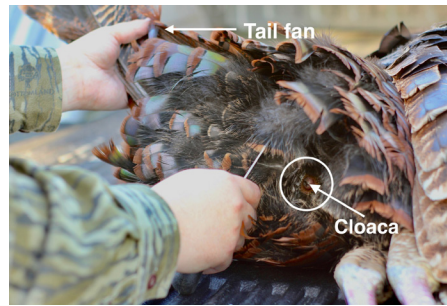
Displaying a hunter's harvested trophy plays an important role in the entire experience from start to finish. Not only will a properly prepared trophy bring about visual enjoyment, but it will also act as a reminder of success in the field and serve as a keepsake that can be passed on to future generations.

There are multiple ways to mount and display your wildlife harvest right at home that will lead to long-lasting memories. However, the process is unfamiliar for many and often leaves hunters wondering, "What's next?" The following guide covers the two most commonly hunted species in Kentucky (wild turkey and white-tailed deer) and the necessary steps that can be completed at home to obtain, preserve, and display the contents of the harvest.

WILD TURKEY

Wild turkeys are one of the most hunted species in Kentucky. Hunters who are lucky enough to be successful in their hunting season have a variety of ways to mount and display a turkey after harvest. This section will cover the mountable components of turkeys and the process after harvest to preserve and mount your trophy. Specifically, this section will cover preparing and preserving the fan, beard, spurs, and wings for mounting. Keep in mind that the mounting process will typically take place after the bird has been cleaned and processed. Hunters who desire a full taxidermy mount should reach out to their preferred taxidermist for instruction before processing.

Turkey Fan Mount



Step 1: Tail Fan Removal

To begin, the tail fan needs to be cut away and removed from the bird. Tail fan removal involves holding the fan closed and cutting away the tissue at the base of the fan where it meets the rump of the bird. More specifically, cut behind the tailbone, close to the vent (cloaca). It is important to note that enough feathers should be cut away to ensure the tail fan is intact, whereas the smaller pre-tail feathers can be cut and trimmed down based on individual mount preferences afterward.



Step 2: Cleaning the Fan

Cleaning the fan is an important part of the preparation process. This will remove any unnecessary tissue on the tail fan and leave only the connective tissue between the feather quills for the drying process.

Excess meat or tissue that is not removed will decompose, leading to smell and the potential for your fan to fall apart over time. The cleaning process involves using a knife or sharp edge to scrape off any leftover tissue found on or around the base of the tail fan. However, it is important to leave enough connective tissue between feathers to ensure the fan remains intact. Take your time while removing the last bit of tissue; when in doubt, you can err on the side of keeping excess tissue during this step and make up for it during the preservation process.



Step 3: Shaping the Fan

Now that the fan has been cleaned, you can prepare the fan for the drying process. For this step, find a large, flat piece of material with enough room to completely spread out the tail fan with the front facing up. Something like a large, flattened cardboard box will work, but the selected material must be able to hold pins or staples in place over an extended period of time.

Take the cleaned fan and spread it all the way out, with each tail feather exposed and the end feathers parallel to each other. It should make close to a half-circle, representing what the fan would look like spread out by the

bird while strutting. It is important to note that this step can vary according to personal preference based on the desired tail fan shape. Next, using items such as pins or staples, pin above each of the bottom feathers and a few in the middle to hold the tail fan's desired shape in preparation for the drying process. It is usually easier to make the general form of the fan and then start anchoring it in the desired shape from one side to the other. Pins make it easier to make small fixes at the end to get the desired shape.

If you prefer to use a different method for shaping, you can use a pants hanger with clips to shape your fan. With this method, you can use the clips on the hanger to hold the bottom of the tail feathers on each side, aligning the bottom of the fan to run parallel to the hanger. At this point, you can spread the fan out and clip the feathers based on your desired shape. This is your trophy, so you can shape it as you see fit, but this will be the shape it holds. There is little ability to fix problems after it is preserved.

Step 4: Drying and Preserving Fan

After the tail fan is positioned and spread out on the flat surface, you can then use borax to initiate the drying process. Borax detergent can be purchased at your local grocery store to be used for this process. Use the borax to liberally cover the



front and back of the fan, within the areas that you initially cleaned where the tissue is exposed at the base of the fan. It is important to ensure borax covers the entirety of this

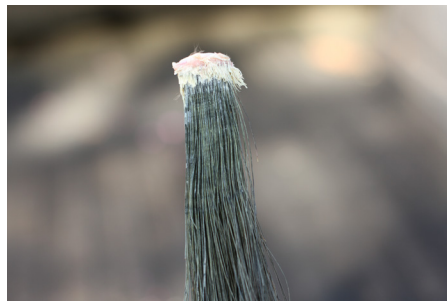
area and all tissue. Once the borax has been applied, find a safe place to store the tail fan face-up while the fan is drying. The drying process should take around two to three weeks to ensure the exposed area is completely dried and ready to move on to mounting your trophy.

Beard Removal and Preservation



Step 1: Beard Removal

Beard removal and preservation is a simple process and an appealing way to remember your harvest by itself or with the tail. Locate the beard on your harvest and pull the beard so that you are able to cut along the base where it meets the bird. You will want to cut at a point that will leave around one-half inch of tissue with the beard, so that it stays connected. If you cut too close to the base of the beard, the beard will fall apart.



Step 2: Drying and Preservation

Once the beard is removed, you can prepare for the drying process using borax as mentioned above. Use the borax to cover all exposed tissue located at the base of the beard.

Once completely covered, you can add additional borax to a container of your choice such as a plastic bag, then place the tissue part of the beard into the borax and place the



container in a safe area for drying and preservation. It should take around two weeks for the exposed tissue to completely dry.

Spur Removal and Preservation

Step 1: Spur Removal

For spur removal, use a saw or loppers to cut and remove the legs of your turkey right around the ankle joint. This will ensure you have plenty to work with. You have several options to display your spurs, based on your preference.



- Method 1: This method keeps most of the leg and involves sawing or lopping the leg right below the ankle joint, leaving both the feet of the bird as well as the spurs attached to the leg
- Method 2: The second method only keeps the spur portion of the leg. Start the same way by removing the leg right at the knee joint. Instead of keeping the feet, however, you can use a hacksaw



or pair of loppers to cut about an inch on both sides of the spur, leaving only a small portion of the leg with the spur attached.

Step 2: Spur Cleaning and Preparation for Presentation

The two different methods of spur removal involve slightly different cleaning processes.

- Method 1: If you cut and save the entire leg of the turkey under the ankle joint, start by cleaning up and smoothing out the edges of the cut. This can be completed using a small knife or file. Once completed, both legs should be left overnight for drying before moving on to the preservation process.
- Method 2: The second method requires taking the small pieces of the leg where the spurs are attached and ensuring any soft parts are removed before the drying process. This can be completed by running the spurs under water and using an item such as a toothpick to remove any leftover bone marrow. Once all tissue and soft parts have been removed, allow the spurs to dry overnight before you move on to the preservation process.

Step 3: Spur Drying and Preservation

- Method 1: After they have dried overnight, you can place each leg with the spurs in borax, ensuring that any exposed tissue has been covered. Submerge the leg under borax in the small container for about one to two weeks to ensure the preservation process is complete. If desired, you can arrange and pin the feet in the shape or style of your choice before submerging them in borax.
- Method 2: Once the spurs are cleaned, take a plastic bag or small container filled with borax and place both spurs down in the borax, ensuring all exposed areas have been covered. Once placed in borax, find a safe place to store the spurs for around one

to two weeks to ensure the entire contents have been dried and fully preserved.



Wing Removal and Preservation

Step 1: Wing Removal

When removing the wings on your harvest, use a knife to cut close to where the wing meets the breast, making sure to leave enough of the shoulder to work with later. Leaving this bone attached to the wing will help improve the overall structure and support of the wing once it is dried and preserved.

Step 2: Wing Cleaning and Preparation

Once the wings are removed, use a knife to remove the feathers at the base of the wing where the shoulder meets the bird. Remove all of the feathers to expose the tissue covering the shoulder bone. Use a knife to remove the tissue carefully until the area is left only with the exposed bone, feather quills, and the skin behind it.



Step 3: Wing Drying and Preservation

Now that both wings have been cleaned and prepared, you can move on to the preservation process. As with the tail fan, you can use a large sheet of cardboard or similar flat material and insert small pins or

staples to hold the wings in the shape of your liking. Make sure the cleaned side is facing up so you can move on to applying borax.

For preservation, generously pour borax over the exposed skin and tissue, ensuring the entire area is covered. Once completed, find a safe place to store the wings for about two to three weeks to ensure the wings are properly dried and preserved. Continue to make sure the wings remain both covered in borax and dry during the two- to three-week preservation period.



Finished Mount

There are several ways to mount and display components of your harvest. Ultimately, the decision is a personal preference as to how you want the final mount to be displayed. There are numerous options available and many more that can be created on your own. For the example in this publication, we purchased a plaque to display the preserved harvest, but by no means is this the required route. It is just used as an option to show a completed product.



WHITE-TAILED DEER

In this section, we will cover the steps that can be used to create a European mount to preserve and display your trophy deer at home. A European mount is a mounting style that shows an animal's skull and antlers (or horns, depending on species). It differs from a shoulder mount, which utilizes the hide of your harvest. There are multiple options available to clean the deer skull before mounting. In this publication, we highlight three commonly used methods: boiling the skull, burying the skull, and using dermestid beetles.

European Mount



Step 1: Skinning the Skull

The first step to achieving a European mount involves cleaning the hide away from the skull. You will want to use a knife or scalpel to cut away any excess hide or tissue from the skull before you start the cleaning process. Be careful not to cut into the skull, as it may be brittle in some areas. After the skull has been skinned and most of the tissue has been removed, you can focus on removing the lower jawbone (mandible) from the skull. (This can also be done during step 2, if preferred.) Use a knife to cut away where the mandible connects at the back of the skull and work to detach it from the skull itself, as this will not be used for the mount.

Step 2: Cleaning the Skull

There are three common methods that can be used to achieve the same end result of removing all the muscles and tissue from the exterior and interior parts of the skull.

- Method 1 (boiling the skull): For this method, you need a pot large enough to submerge the deer skull and a heat source to heat the water in the pot. For a heat source, an outside propane setup is recommended. Keep in mind that if you choose to use a stove inside, this could cause an unpleasant smell for some time. Start by filling the pot with enough water to cover the skull completely. Before adding the skull, heat the water in the pot until it reaches a simmer or light boil. It does not need to reach a complete boil. Before boiling, though it is not necessary, you can wrap cloth or tape around the base of the antlers to reduce the potential for discoloration of the antlers during the boiling process. Once the water reaches a light boil, place the skull in the water and boil it for about an hour.



Check the skull after an hour and begin using a knife to remove tissue and skin from the skull as it loosens up. Place the skull back into the pot and let it simmer for approximately another two hours, until all tissue can be removed from the skull. Make sure you use old oven mitts or other means of protecting yourself from being burned, as the skull and tissue will be very hot.

- Method 2 (burying the skull): This method is more time-consuming

but does not require as much labor as boiling. It uses insects and other naturally occurring biota to do the cleaning for you. If you use this method, you will need to find a spot with enough room to completely bury the skull and leave it in the ground for an extended period (multiple months). Use a shovel to dig a hole large enough to fit the entire skull. Once completed, place the skull into the hole and cover the skull completely with soil, until only the antlers are exposed, ensuring all areas that need to be cleaned have been covered. The more fur, skin, and muscle removed before burying, the better, and it will speed up the required time to clean the skull. Once buried, you can use a container anchored to the ground or fence large enough to fit over the antlers to reduce the risk of the skull being dug up by scavengers, chewed on by rodents, or bleached by the sun. A large rock or weight can be placed on the container to hold it down while the skull is buried. Remember to drill or cut out ventilation holes to allow air to filter in and out and assist in the process. The skull should remain buried for approximately six months. You should dig it up and check on the progress after four to five months and replace it if there is still tissue remaining on the skull.

- Method 3 (dermestid beetles): Dermestid beetles are a type of insect commonly used in museum specimen preparation as well as taxidermy. They feed on animal skin and muscles of dead animals but do not harm the bones while doing so, which makes them useful for cleaning the skulls and bones of many animals. This method is useful if you expect to clean several skulls each year, as the colony will need to be fed regularly once established. Dermestid

beetles can be purchased online from taxidermists or businesses that breed the beetles. You will typically need approximately 100 to 200 beetles to start your colony for the cleaning process. Keep in mind that dermestid beetles should be kept in a warm, darker area and can be held in a container (wood or plastic) large enough to fit your deer skull. There are a few tricks to keeping these beetles over long periods of time, and usually those guidelines are provided by the company selling the beetles. Once you have prepared the container, place your skull in with the beetles so that the cleaning process can begin. The time required for the cleaning process varies based on beetle colony size but will typically take around two to three weeks. Once all the tissue and skin are removed and the cleaning process is complete, you can move on to washing the skull. The beetles will help you know when this point is reached, as they will no longer be found in large numbers on or within the skull.



Step 3: Pressure Washing the Skull
After the skull has been cleaned with any of the three described methods, you can move on to cleaning any remaining tissue from the skull. For this step, use a pressure washer to

remove any excess skin and tissue remaining on the skull. Make sure to evenly pressure wash the front and back of the skull to ensure the entire area is cleaned.



Step 4: Skull Whitening

Once the skull has been completely cleaned, you can move on to the final step: whitening and preparing the skull for mounting. For this step, use hydrogen peroxide or peroxide developer. Make sure to wear disposable gloves and eye protection during this process. Start by using a small paintbrush and evenly apply the peroxide on the skull, making sure to cover all areas visible for the mount.

Once applied, place the skull in a designated area away from the reach of kids or pets and let the skull dry overnight. After drying, use a brush as well as warm running water to clean off any remaining peroxide from the skull. Once completely dry, you can then move on to mounting and displaying your trophy.

Finished European Mount

There are numerous options you can consider when creating a European mount. In terms of mounting considerations, hooks (either purchased or created) are often a great option. You can also choose to include a wooden plaque to hang the mount on, if desired.



Sources and Other Resources

Turkey Preservation

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Deer Skull Preservation

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