

# FUR HANDLING TIPS

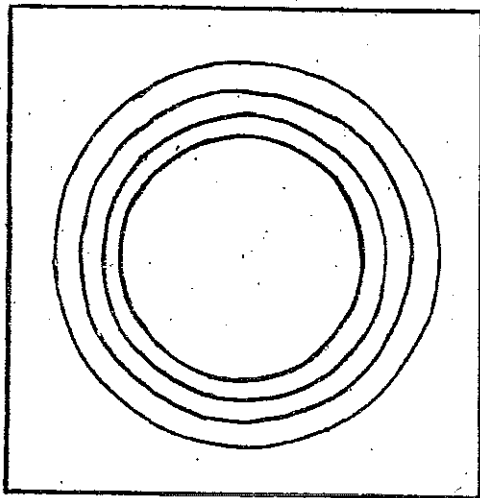
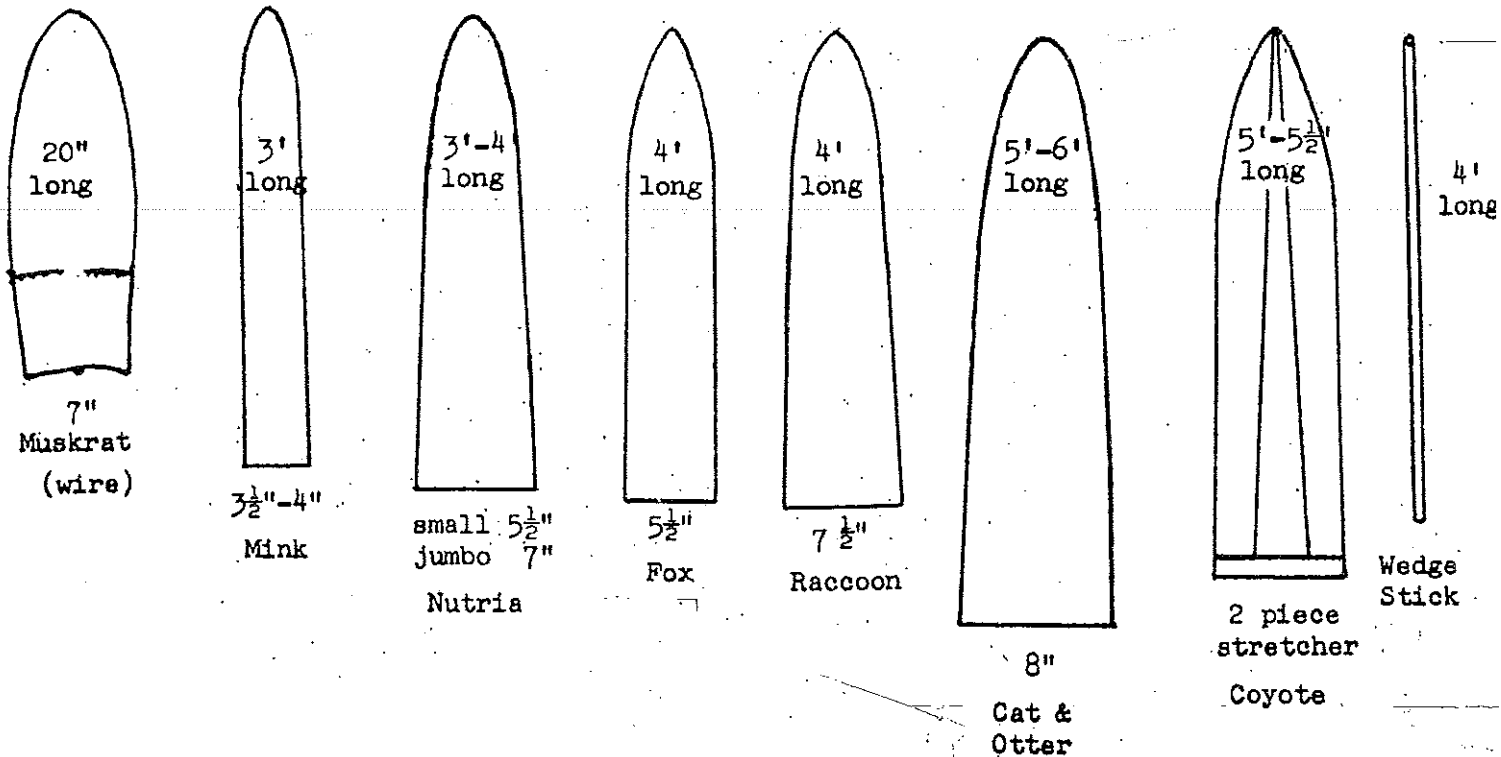
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ADDITIONAL INFORMATION FOR THE OREGON  
TRAPPER EDUCATION HOME STUDY COURSE

Thanks To:

Oregon Territorial Council On Furs, Inc.

## BASIC STRETCHER SIZES



Beaver Board

Diameter of circles: 24"-26"-  
28"-30"-32"-34"

Stretchers should be made from 1/2" boards, sanded smooth and beveled at the edges. A coat of varathane will make them last longer and also make it easier to remove pelts. A "wedge stick" must always be inserted on the belly side when using wood stretchers, since the pelt shrinks as it dries and will be too difficult to remove otherwise. Wire stretchers can be purchased and used instead of boards.

As a rule in today's market, buyers prefer a longer, narrower shape for a pelt. This is especially true of coon, mink, nutria, fox and cat.

## SIZE CHART

Length + base width:

|      |       |           |
|------|-------|-----------|
| MINK | Small | under 22" |
|      | Med.  | 22" - 25" |
|      | Lg.   | 25" - 29" |
|      | XLg.  | 29" - 34" |

Tip of nose to shortest point on sides and base:

|         |   |        |  |
|---------|---|--------|--|
| MUSKRAT | Small 10" - 11½"<br>Med. 11½" - 13"<br>LM 13" - 14½"<br>Lg. 14½" - 16"<br>XLg. 16" - 17½" | NUTRIA | Small 20" - 23"<br>Med. 23" - 26"<br>Lg. 26" - 30"<br>XLg. 30" - 36"<br>Jumbo 36" & up |
|---------|---|--------|--|

Tip of nose to base of tail:

|         |  |         |   |
|---------|--|---------|---|
| RACCOON | Small under 22"<br>Med. 22" - 24"<br>LM 24" - 26"<br>Lg. 26" - 30"<br>XLg. 30" - 34"<br>XXLg. 34" & up | COYOTE  | Pups under 28"<br>Small 28" - 32"<br>Med. 32" - 36"<br>Lg. 36" - 41"<br>XLg. 41" & up |
| BOBCAT  | Kit. under 25"<br>Small 25" - 28"<br>Med. 28" - 32"<br>Lg. 32" - 36"<br>XLg. 36" & up                  | RED FOX | Small under 27"<br>Med. 27" - 31"<br>Lg. 31" - 35"<br>XLg. 35" & up                   |

Length + width:

|        |               |           |
|--------|---------------|-----------|
| BEAVER | Kit.          | Under 40" |
|        | Small         | 40" - 44" |
|        | Med.          | 45" - 49" |
|        | LM            | 50" - 54" |
|        | Lg.           | 55" - 59" |
|        | XLg.          | 60" - 64" |
|        | Blanket       | 65" - 67" |
|        | Super Blanket | 68" & up  |

## BASIC TIPS

All fur should be clean, dry and free of burrs before any skinning is begun.

Muskrats can be wrapped in a single sheet of newspaper when put in your car or truck and they will be quite dry when you get home.

Prior to skinning, hang coon, mink, etc., in front of a fan set on high speed. They will dry in about one hour. If no fan is available, fur can be dried with towels, rags or burlap. In no case should direct heat or sunlight be used.

Brush all fur before you start skinning, especially coon, rats, mink, etc., which will not be turned.

You can freeze your catch whole if you don't have time to skin the day they are caught, but skinning is much easier if done the same day. Beaver are an exception. They are easier to handle if allowed to sit for 24 hours in a cool, well-ventilated place.

If you're short on time or stretchers, green (skinned) pelts can be frozen before stretching. Turn them fur side out, to prevent freezer burn, roll them up and freeze them in plastic bags. Be sure that none of the flesh side is exposed and that it does not come in contact with the fur.

Once the pelts are on the stretchers, drying time varies drastically depending on the temperature, air circulation and humidity of each individual fur shed. As an example, with temperatures at 50 - 60° , a fan on 24 hours a day, and Dri-Z-Air in use, rats will dry in two days, coon in four - five days. Fox, cats and coyotes are ready to "turn" in about 12 hours.

Finished pelts can be stored under the above conditions for three or four months if they are hung by the nose and given some "breathing room."

Muskrat pelts will be much less likely to mildew if stored in a freezer. Fifty rat pelts, nose down, will fit into a standard grocery sack. Slip another sack over the top and store until the day you plan to sell them.

Never stack your pelts, as this will cause the fur to become matted and increase the chance of mildew. Again, beaver are an exception. They are usually stacked, alternating one fur side up and the next fur side down, with a piece of plywood on top to keep them flat. Beaver pelts should be checked periodically, especially around the eyes and ears, to prevent mildew. A rag dipped in a bleach solution will remove any mildew that does appear.

All pelts should be brushed or combed before selling.

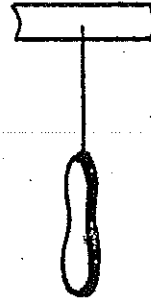
## BASIC TOOLS



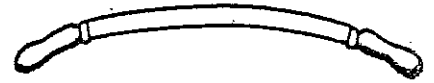
Beaver Knife



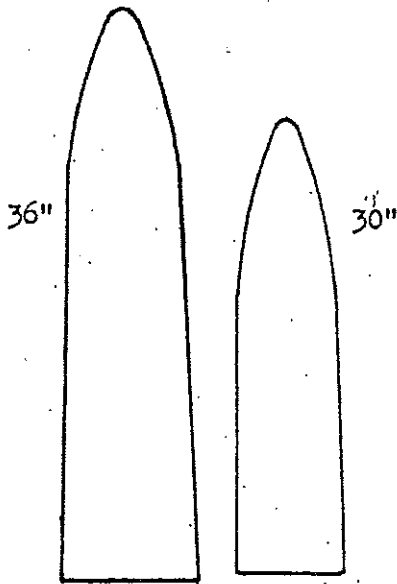
Skinning Knife



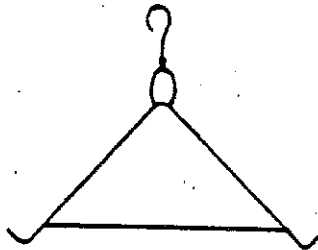
Fleshing Tool



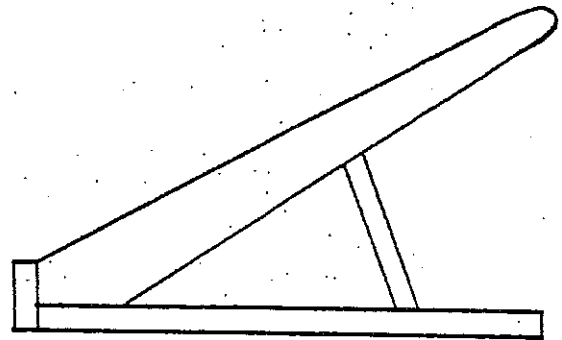
2 Handled Scraper



Fleshing Boards



Skinning Gambrel



Fleshing Beam

### Additional Items:

Sharpening stone

Sharpening steel

Rubber Apron

Push-pins

Staple gun & staples

Brushes & fur combs

Fan

Tail stripper or pliers

Paper towels

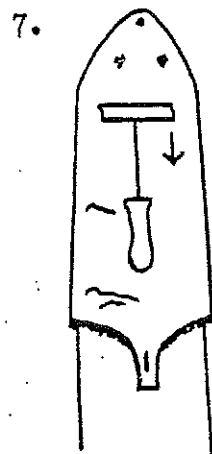
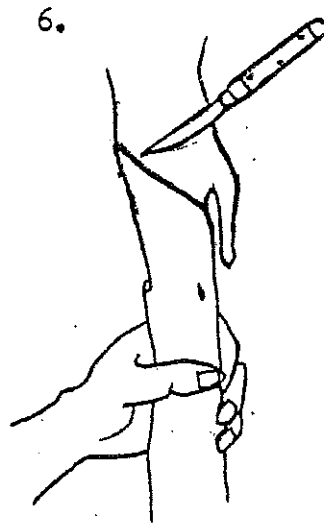
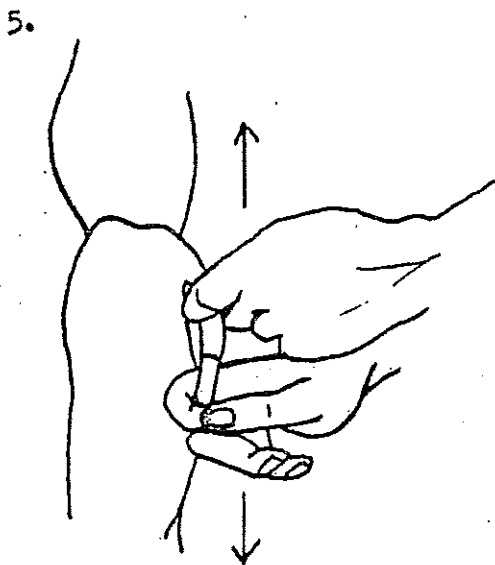
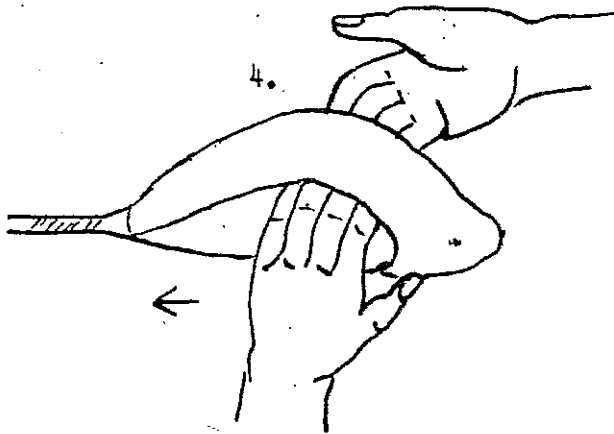
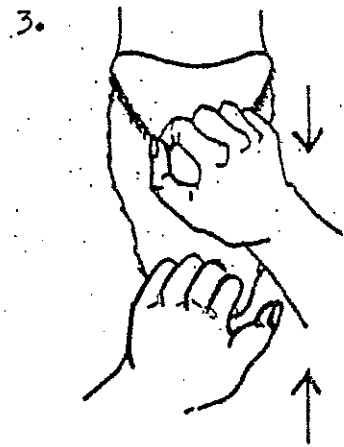
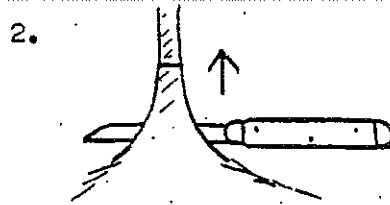
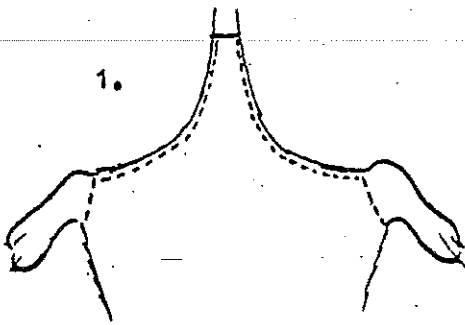
Leather needle & carpet thread

## MUSKRAT

Once the muskrat is completely dry and brushed down, the skinning can begin. Some experienced trappers can skin a 'rat in their laps in a matter of seconds, but for the beginner it is best to secure it in some manner. A nail, a loop of string, or a "clip board" mounted on a bench or table can all be used to hold the muskrat by the tail.

1. Keep your knife as sharp as possible. Make a cut around each hind leg and a cut around the tail 1" up past the base of the tail. In other words, leave about 1" of the "leather" attached to the pelt. Slit the fur from each leg-cut to the tail-cut.
  2. Pinch the fur next to the tail, insert your knife and cut the pelt free from the tail. Do this on both the back and belly. These are the only cuts necessary until you get to the ears and eyes.
  3. With the muskrat on its belly, push on the head with one hand and pull the pelt up and over the shoulders with the other hand. (This pushing and pulling will cause the carcass to "sit up" on its haunches.)
  4. Now turn the 'rat over on its back. Keep working your thumbs and fingers between the pelt and carcass until the pelt is freed from the chest area. Now work all the way down the belly until you reach the tail. Remember, you skin the back up towards the head, but on the belly-side you are working from the chest down towards the tail. (This helps reduce the chance of the intestines coming out of the carcass.)
  5. Slip the pelt over the head area. By using your thumbs, you can easily remove the pelt from the front feet.
  6. All that remains is to skin out the head. Keep a steady pressure on the pelt. Two deep cuts will get you past the ears, and two careful surface cuts will take care of the eyes. Then, by turning your blade to avoid the teeth, the mouth area can be stripped, and the skinning is finished. Make these cuts carefully so that the holes are as small as possible.
  7. Fleshing muskrat pelts is a simple, fast operation. All you need is a wooden fleshing board and a fleshing tool. Scrape just hard enough to remove all the fat and any large or loose pieces of flesh. A thin, solid layer of red meat should remain on the pelt. Do not over-flesh, as this will cause the pelt to feel and sound "papery" and will lower the value. While the pelt is on the board, make a small slit in each "tail tab." These tabs will allow you to apply more pressure without tearing the pelt when you put it on a wire stretcher.
- Be sure the pelt is centered on the stretcher, fur side in. The two front

legs should be equal distances from the side, as should the eyeholes. After the pelt is completely dry, take it off the stretcher, cut the tail tabs off at the fur line, and run your hand inside the finished pelt to "fluff" the fur. The pelt is now ready for sale.



## NUTRIA

When the nutria is completely dry, secure a rope around the left hind leg and hang from the ceiling. Comb or brush the fur.

1. Cut off the front feet at the fur line. Make a cut around each hind leg and a cut around the tail, 1" up past the base of the tail, leaving some "leather" attached to the pelt. Holding the loose foot, slit the fur from the hanging leg-cut to the tail-cut.

2. Cut the pelt free from the tail and work your way down to and around the free leg, cutting or pulling front and back till you reach the anus area. Switch hanging legs and repeat on the other leg, keeping your knife sharp.

3. The pelt can now be pulled all the way to the shoulders. Use your knife if the going gets tough, but remember to cut behind the skin into the membrane and never into the skin itself. It's best to use your thumbs and fingers to strip the front legs and armpit area since it is difficult to distinguish pelt from meat here, and using a knife may cause a hole. Pull the pelt down over each front leg.

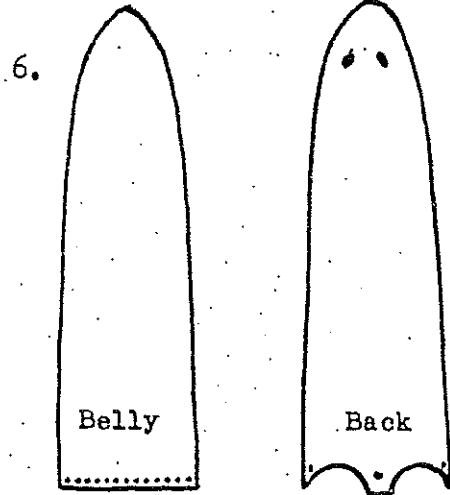
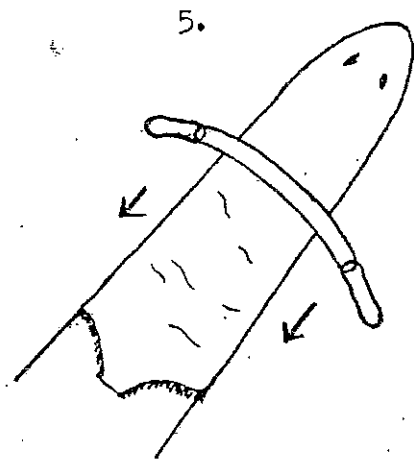
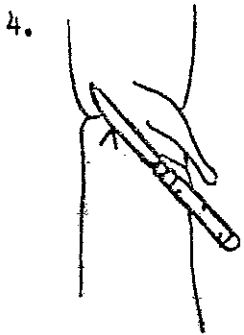
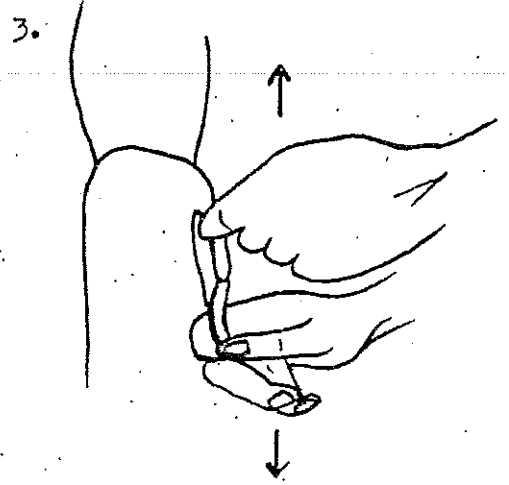
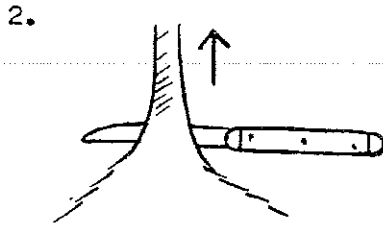
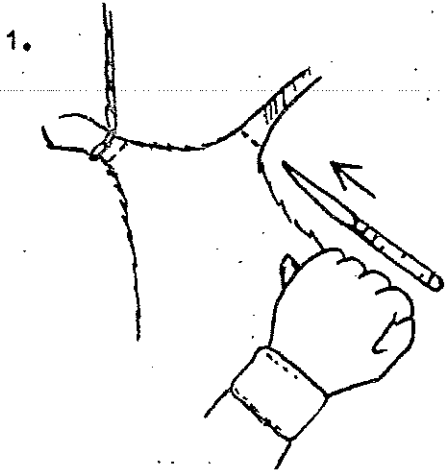
4. Once again, a sharp knife is needed to cut along the ear and eye areas. Make the ear cut above and behind the ear cartilage. Lay your knife flat along the teeth and continue cutting until you reach the nose. Cut through the nose cartilage and peel it free from the carcass.

5. Place the pelt on your fleshing beam and with a two-handled scraper, remove all the fat and flesh. Be careful not to put excessive pressure on the knife while fleshing; this will cause hair roots to come through the pelt. Remove all flesh from the head, including ear and eye areas.

6. Now place the pelt on the proper stretcher (wood or wire) fur side in. IMPORTANT - on a nutria, the belly is the fur that the buyers want. When stretching a nutria, take extra care to get the most stretch from the belly. Cut straight along the bottom of the belly. Stretch as tight as possible and secure with nails  $\frac{1}{4}$ " apart across the bottom of the belly. Tack sides and center of the tail on the back. When using wood stretchers, be sure to use a wedge stick on the back side of the pelt.

Sew any holes in the belly side with brown thread, or if on a board, tack shut with small nails.





## BEAVER

There are several distinctly different ways to skin, flesh and stretch beaver pelts. The method described below has been used on thousands of beavers and will give very good results if followed carefully.

The first step in handling beaver is to remove the feet. Lopping shears will make short work of this job, but the feet can also be cut off with a knife.

1. With the beaver on its back, make one cut from the base of the tail, straight up the belly to the chin. Use a regular pointed skinning knife for this step. Be careful not to puncture the castors (oil sacks) near the tail area. Next, cut all the way around the base of the tail.
2. From this point on, a knife with a rounded blade tip should be used. Starting about half-way down the original cut, grasp the edge of the hide between your thumb and forefinger and start cutting the pelt from the carcass. The first inch or two must be skinned clean all the way around the hide so that no scraping will be needed in this area after the pelt is nailed to your board. With small, even knife strokes, remove the pelt all along one side until you reach the middle of the back. Be careful around the legs. Now flip the pelt back over the skinned carcass, turn the beaver around and repeat the process on the other half. Keep a steady pressure on the pelt at all times and try to keep your knife at an angle which will allow you to cut the flesh away from the skin, not from the carcass. Cuts around the eyes and teeth will complete the skinning process.

Now lay the pelt aside and remove the castors from the carcass. Be careful not to puncture the castor sacks and once they are removed, hang them over a wire or string to dry. Castors can be used for making lure or they can be sold to fur buyers.

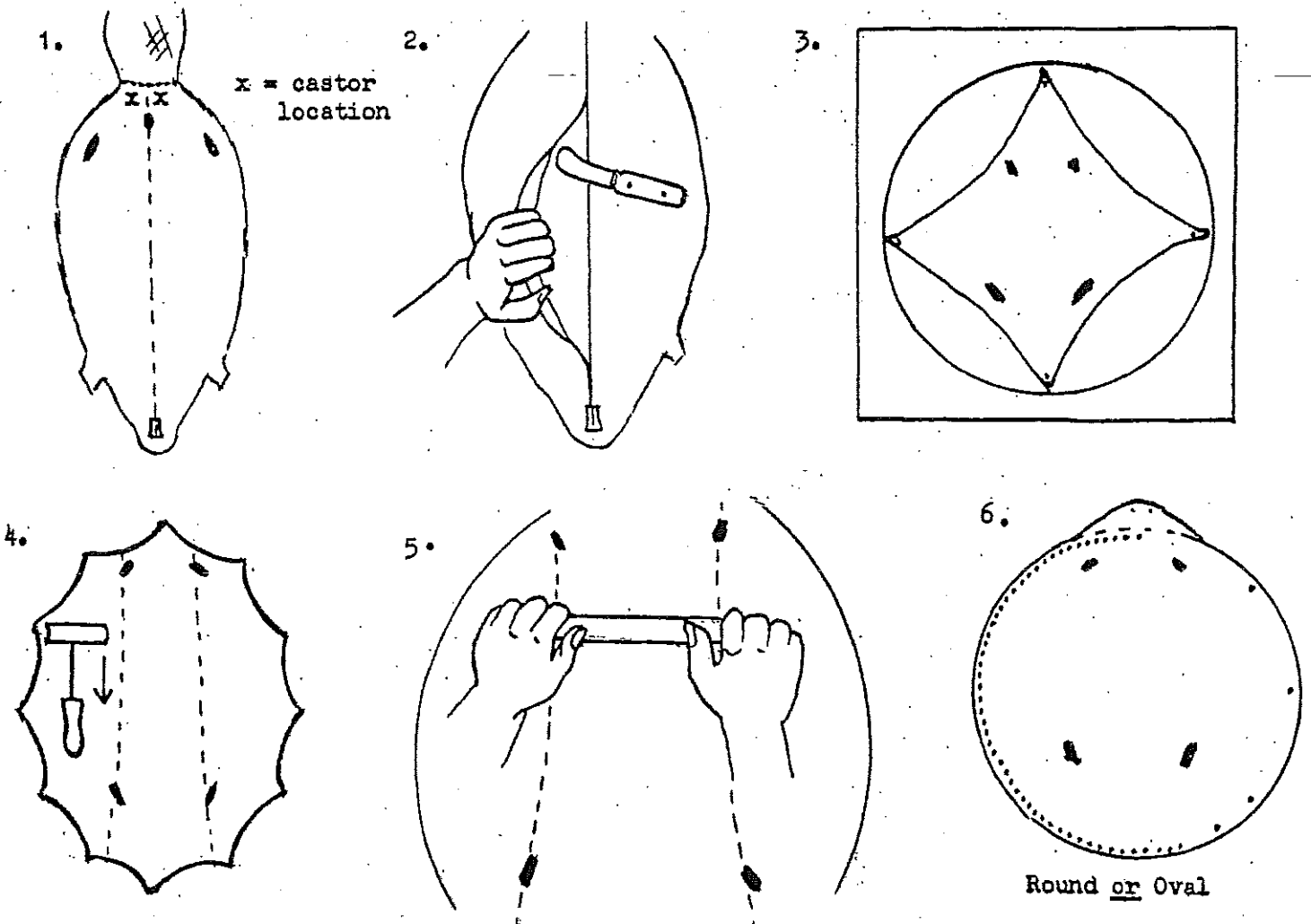
The next step is to determine the size of stretch to use for the finished pelt. The easiest way is to hang the pelt from its nose and measure the length from nose to tail; deduct 4" and this will give you the diameter of the circle you should use.

3. Laying the pelt on your stretcher, put one nail in the nose area and one in the tail, then one on each side to form a "kite." Add one or two more nails to each side to draw the pelt into a rough circle or oval.
4. Now comes the tricky part. All meat and fat must be scraped off the pelt. This can be done with a scraping tool in the area outside the leg holes, but as you work toward the center you will find that the meat just won't budge.

5. The quickest way to handle this is to "shave" the meat off in strips. A third kind of knife must be used, one with a long curved blade that has been sharpened and honed very carefully. By holding the knife as shown in the drawing, you can remove the meat in 1" strips. One pass over each area is all that is needed. If your knife drags, stop and sharpen it.

6. Now move to alternate sides until the entire pelt is nailed down at about  $\frac{1}{2}$ " intervals. Trim the nose and lips so that the finished product is round or slightly oval-shaped without any "points" sticking out.

If you're doing your first few beaver, have a little patience. Work slowly and vary the blade angle around the legs, tail and lower back until you get the feel of the "shaving" procedure. When all fat and meat is removed, sew or nail the leg holes shut and your pelt is now ready for drying. A screwdriver can be used to lift the pelt up on the nails all the way around, allowing air to circulate between the fur and the board.



## COYOTE

1. Before skinning a coyote, hang it from a skinning gambrel and brush or comb the fur to remove all dirt, burrs, etc. With a sharp knife, cut along the inside of the back leg to the base of the tail and on across to the other leg. Cut around the ankles.

2. Loosen the pelt around the base of the tail and strip out the tailbone with a tail stripper. Insert your knife into the tail and open it up the entire length.

Before the pelt is pulled down, remove the front legs. Lopping shears work best. Cut the legs off about 4" below the elbows. Now you can simply pull the pelt all the way down to the shoulder area. Use your knife if the pelt is stubborn, but always cut behind the skin.

3. When you get to the front legs, force your fingers between the pelt and the shoulder and strip out the leg.

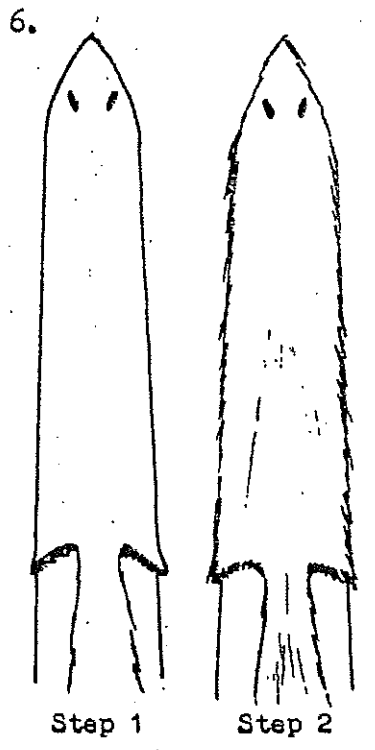
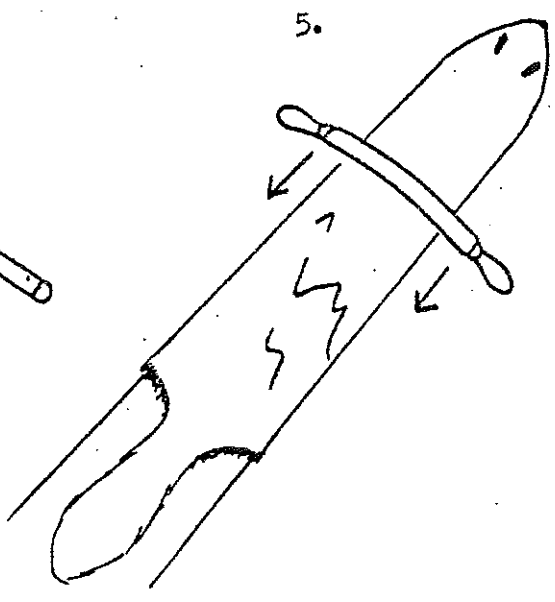
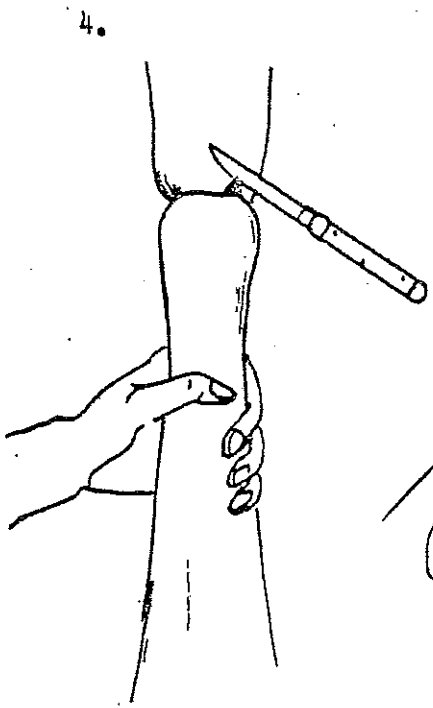
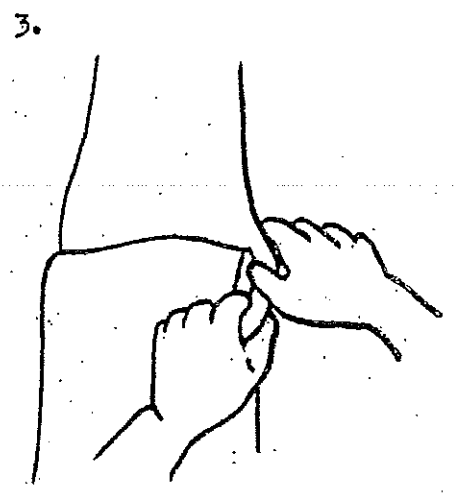
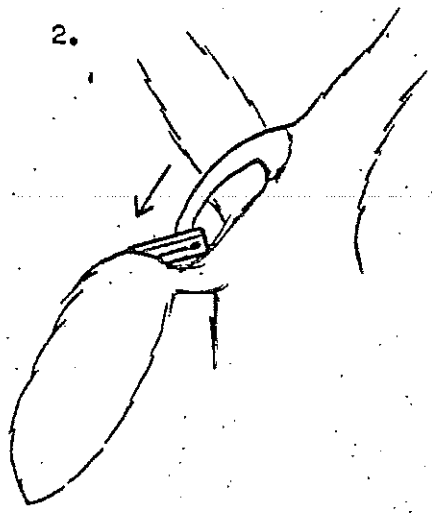
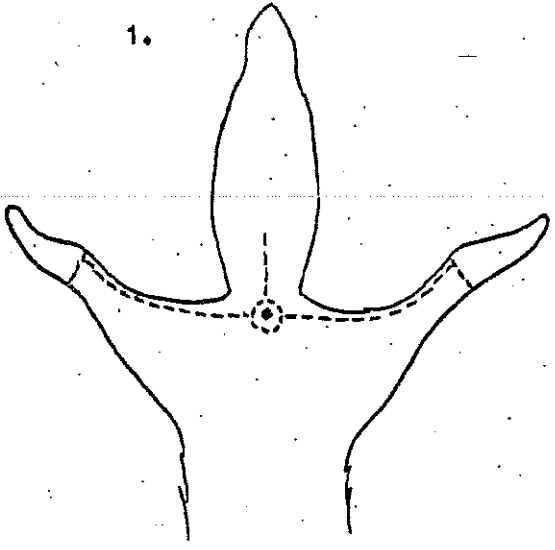
4. Continue pulling the pelt down over the head. Making sure your skinning knife is sharp, make two deep cuts at the ears and two more cuts around the eyes. Then cut carefully around the teeth on both sides, cut straight through the nose cartilage and the pelt will be free from the carcass.

5. Place the pelt on your fleshing beam and, with a two-handled scraper, remove all the fat and flesh. If any holes or cuts show up, sew them up carefully.

Some trappers elect to wash their pelts at this point. Only cold water and soap (Ivory Flakes for example) not detergent should be used. Wash the pelt with the fur side out and rinse in cold water until all dirt is removed. Wring the pelt out and strip off as much water as possible, using towels or rags. You can hang the pelt by its nose in front of a fan for a few hours, brushing occasionally to dry the fur even more.

6. Now place the pelt on the proper stretcher, fur side in and hang it from the nose until the skin is dry to the touch, 12 - 24 hours depending on the temperature. Then turn the pelt fur side out, re-stretch it, and allow it to dry for a couple of days. If a plain board stretcher is used, be sure to use a wedge stick. The wedge stick is not necessary if a wire stretcher or two piece wooden stretcher is used.

Back brushing a finished coyote pelt will greatly improve its appearance and therefore its value. Starting with the tail, use a fur comb and slowly comb through every inch of the fur. Spend a half hour on one pelt and then hold it up next to one that is still on the stretcher. The difference will be amazing.



## RACCOON

When the raccoon is completely dry, hang it securely by the hind feet from a skinning gambrel or from two ropes spaced about 12" apart. Comb or brush the fur, including the tail, in both directions until it is free of all dirt.

1. Make a cut from the inside of one back leg to the other. Then, starting from the base of the tail, cut around the anus. Make a cut around each hind leg at the ankles.

Slit the tail at least half way down to the tip, and by working around the hind legs and tail, expose the base of the tailbone.

2. Next, use a tail stripper to remove the entire tailbone. The tail can now be slit all the way by placing your knife inside the "sack" and slitting it open. Your knife must be kept sharp during the entire skinning process.

3. The pelt can now be pulled all the way down to the shoulders. Use your knife if the going gets tough, but remember to cut behind the skin, into the membrane, and never into the skin itself. It's best to use your thumbs and fingers to strip the front leg and armpit areas since it is difficult to distinguish pelt from meat here, and using a knife may cause a hole. Pull the pelt down over each front leg and cut it loose around the elbow.

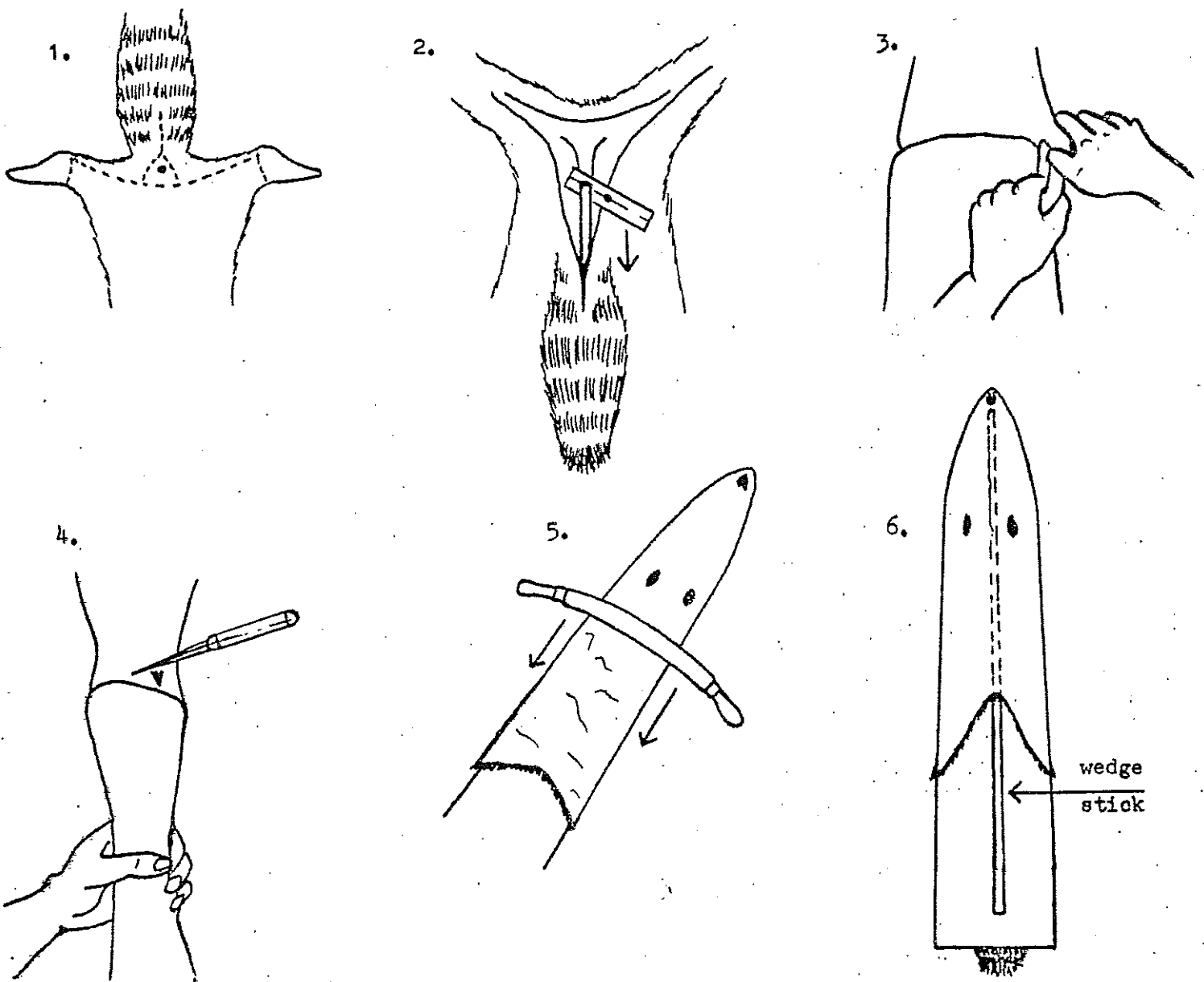
4. Once again, a sharp knife is needed to cut along the ears and around the eyes. Then lay your knife flat along side the teeth and continue cutting until you reach the nose. Cut straight through the nose cartilage and the pelt will be free of the carcass.

5. Fleshing a coon on a fleshing beam with a two-handled scraper is a relatively hard job compared to some other furs. To try to flesh a coon in any other manner with different tools is almost impossible if you want a good-looking, finished product. Slip the pelt, fur side in, over your beam. Beginning at the throat, push all the fat and meat downward, using a heavy steady pressure. Rotate the pelt until the job is completed, including a careful and complete fleshing of the tail. With just a little practice, most people can flesh a coon in 10 - 15 minutes.

6. Raccoon are stretched fur side in. Be sure the pelt is centered on the stretcher. The tail should be opened up so that it will dry evenly with the rest of the pelt. If you are using wooden stretchers, either staples or push-pins can be used to secure the pelt. Buyers prefer that a "window" be cut on the belly side to expose the heavy back fur. This can be done right on the

stretcher before all of the pins or staples are in place. Be sure to slip a "wedge stick" between the pelt and stretcher on the belly side. Otherwise, it will be very difficult to remove, since the pelt shrinks as it dries.

You may now want to do a little touch-up work with a fleshing tool. Do this before the pelt begins to dry to avoid a "re-scraped" look which fur buyers frown upon. After the pelt is completely dried, remove it from the stretcher and "fluff" the fur with a comb or brush.



## MINK

Mink are handled just like raccoon. Your hooks or ropes need to be much closer together and you must be very careful not to puncture the scent glands, two little pea-shaped glands at the base of the tail. Do not cut a window on the belly side as is done with raccoon.

## OPPOSSUM

Opposum, too, are handled exactly the same as raccoon except that the tail is cut off right at the base. You will find them much easier to flesh, but be careful because their skin is much more delicate and will tear quite easily. Do not cut a window on the belly side as is done with raccoon.

## SKUNK

Skin and flesh skunk just like raccoon. Be careful around the base of the tail so you don't puncture the scent glands. After the pelt is fleshed, rinse it good in gasoline (USE PROPER SAFETY PROCEDURE) and then wash the pelt in cold water and a mild soap, not detergent. This will remove most of the odor. Hang the pelt, fur side out, in front of a fan to dry it out before placing it on a stretcher. Do not cut a window on the belly side as is done with raccoon.

## CAT AND FOX

Handle bobcat, lynx and fox the same way you would a coyote. Be careful when fleshing since the skin is delicate and can be torn quite easily. When the fleshing is completed, sew up any holes or cuts which may show up. Put the pelt on the proper stretcher, fur side in, and allow it to dry for 12 - 24 hours. Check the pelt often and turn it fur side out as soon as the flesh side is dry to the touch. Waiting too long will just make it that much harder to turn.

Whether or not you wash your pelts is a matter of individual choice. Some pelts may need washing more than others. The main thing is to make the finished product as attractive as you can.



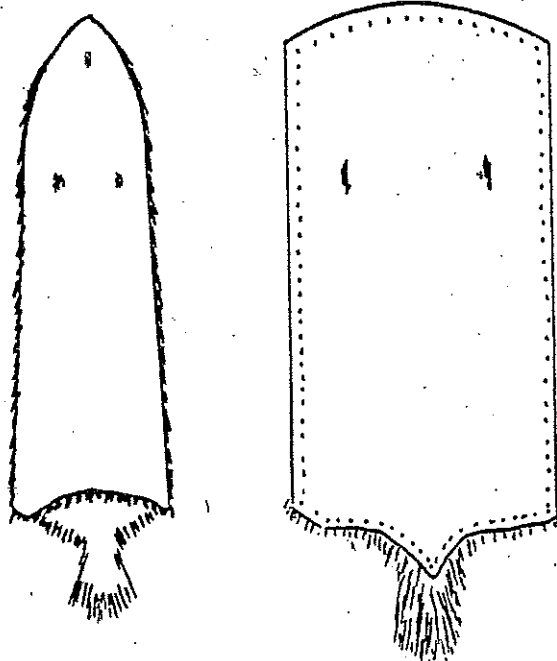
## OTTER

Otter are one of the hardest furbearers to skin and flesh. The basic steps are the same as in handling coon. The main difference is that the pelt must be cut from the carcass every inch of the way. It will not "peel off" as easily as that of a coon, mink, fox or coyote. Patience and a sharp knife are the only answer. Once the pelt is removed, place it on the fleshing beam and remove all fat with a two handled scraper. The entire tail is covered with gristle and care must be taken to remove all of it. You may have to use a skinning knife as well as a scraper. Stretch the otter fur side in, and make sure the tail is nailed open along its entire length.

## BADGER

Badger can be handled either "cased" or "open." For cased pelts, follow the directions for coyote, stretching the pelt fur side out.

For open pelts, skin and flesh as you would for raccoon. After the fleshing is completed, a cut should be made from the middle of the chin all the way down the belly. Lay the pelt, fur side down, on a piece of plywood and nail the shoulders about 16" apart. Now pull the skin down, making it as long as possible, and nail the bottom 16" apart. Pull the nose up and nail it and then proceed all around the pelt, nailing at 1" intervals. The top should be curved and the sides as straight as possible.



Badger cased

Badger open