

## HOW TO BUTCHER A CARIBOU

By Oliver Cameron  
with Ole Wik

### How do you gut a caribou?<sup>1</sup>

What you do depends on how much time you have, how many animals you have to work on, how cold it is, and such.

I seldom hang an animal to gut it, but on occasion I have. I find that it's easier to hang an animal by the head, rather than by the hind legs on a gamble stick<sup>2</sup>. That way when you cut the guts loose, they fall out the smaller end and make less of a mess.

It's easier if an animal is lying belly up, a little on its side. The least I do is slit the skin from the lower edge of the brisket on down to between the hind legs, and usually skin it back a little bit on the sides.

Then various people do it various ways. There's a set of joints on both sides of the brisket.<sup>3</sup> With a caribou you can cut those with your hunting knife, so I usually cut them and lay it open. Sometimes I don't cut the brisket off completely. I'll just cut one side loose and open it up, reach in and score it along the opposite side, and leave it hanging there.

The guts are all fastened together, so if you reach up inside the throat and cut the windpipe and esophagus, you can start working things off. You may have to use a knife a few places to loosen things up. When you get down a little ways, you cut the diaphragm loose from the carcass on both sides. You take the guts and diaphragm and the liver and pull the whole works out.

When you get down to the big intestine and pelvis, you reach down in and squeeze the pellets in the end of the large intestine, pull it up into the carcass, and cut that off. You don't want a bunch of stuff down in there. Take that whole works out.

Then you can salvage the liver and the kidneys and the heart and whatever else you want. I like to save at least part of the small stomachs. You can open that up, dump the contents, and scrape it a little bit. When you get home, you can wash it and cook it. It's good to eat. I generally save anything that I figure is edible.

### Do you save the *ichauraks*?<sup>4</sup>

Yes, I save those.

If I'm going to leave the carcass for some time, that's all I do to it. I turn it over on some brush with the belly down so it can drain, the snow won't blow into it too much, and it doesn't freeze down to the ground. When I come back to get the animal I haul it whole, if it's convenient. Sometimes I can get two carcasses in the sled, side by side, by offsetting them a little bit.

I prefer to leave the fur on as long as I can, to keep it clean. When I get it home I skin it and hang it up so it can freeze. If I get the animal the next day and it hasn't been real cold, the animal is not frozen so hard that I can't start cutting it up right away. That is a convenience. But even if it is frozen, you can take an axe and start chopping.

You spread the front legs out and cut between the leg and the carcass. It cuts loose easily there, so you have those legs off. You can cut the hind legs and pelvis loose in one piece. That's not such a big piece but what you can't take it into the house and let it thaw until you get ready to work on it.

Quite often, if I have a lot of animals to work on, about all I do is remove the front legs, cut off the pelvis and two hind legs in one piece, and score around the inside along the ribs where they fasten to the vertebrae. Then I can usually push the ribs apart to break them loose, wiggle my knife along the vertebrae, and cut each rib free.

I don't like to just take an axe or a heavy knife and just hack at it, leaving sharp little bones. I'd rather disconnect each bone as I come to it.

First of all, I turn the animal over so it's lying belly down, cut along the spine, and take the backstraps<sup>5</sup> off along with the back sinew. I want to save that sinew, but I don't usually take it off right then—it's easy enough to separate it later.

Quite often the tongue and the backstraps are the first things we eat. If I'm out and have time to skin the animals, those are the parts that come home with me.

In that situation you end up with a long spine of vertebrae, with a head on one end and a pelvis on the other. You can cut that into whatever pieces you want to. There's a joint right behind the head, where it joins the neck. If you find the right place, it's easy to cut loose. The same is true where the last vertebra joins the pelvis, especially if you cut from the inside. However, the vertebrae in between have quite a few obstructions that make them hard to separate.

I guess we didn't get around to the process of opening the hide. If I'm going to skin the animal, I generally I cut the legs off pretty close to the carcass so that the leg skins are long enough to make mukluks out of. I skin those legs later.

Starting where I opened it up in the center, I just start working the hide back by fisting it off. You pull it out with one hand, work your knuckles in there, and kind of pry it out from the body.

Or, I sometimes use the back of an axe or something like that. I just get ahold of the hide, pull it out, and beat on it a little bit to make it come loose. Ordinarily, if it's a young bull or a cow, you can pull it right off.

If it's a big bull or an old animal, it's pretty hard to pull it off in places like that. You'll find some places, especially near the hind legs, where it's hanging pretty tough. You may have to use the knife a little bit, but even there you can get it off, if you use a little patience.

I butchered a goat one time. I bought the goat from Keith.<sup>6</sup> I wanted the meat, and a neighbor of his wanted the skin. He wanted to make a drum for his little band he was in, so I was fisting it off all the way and being very careful not to score the hide.

It had hung up a little bit and some places, and finally he got impatient. He asked why I didn't just take a knife and cut it loose there. Well, a goat hide is a thin thing, and could easily be ripped. A little slip can really damage the hide, so I fisted the whole thing off.

Later, after he had taken the hair off and stretched the thing and was using the hide, he mentioned how the skin was so nice to work with because there were no thin spots on it.

That animal didn't look like it was fat—it just looked like a milk goat. But when I opened it up, the fat was all on the inside. A caribou has some fat on the back and on the rump, but that goat had none of that. It made up for it with a lot of intestinal fat.

**If you're going to save the hides, do you gut the animals first, or afterward?**

If I have time, I wait until afterward. If I don't, I just go ahead and open them all and dump the guts out. I might skin one or two, and the rest of the skinning has to wait.

I don't always open the hide right down the middle of the belly. The fur on the belly is thinner and not near as warm, and the skin is thinner there. Quite often I open it more down the sides, so that I take off the skin that covers both sides of the belly. That gives me a piece of skin that's quite a bit larger, and is more or less all the same thickness.

**Do you save the belly skin?**

Oh yes. It's real handy to have a thin piece of skin sometimes. I use it to make mitten liners or something like that. Sometimes I make babiche from it.

**Do you save the antlers and hooves?**

Ordinarily I save both, but sometimes I have just too damned many. The antlers are real handy for making handles for files, knives, ulus, and things like that, and also for making net sinkers.

Hooves are not too hard to get off, once you learn how. When you boil up the feet, you can get a neatsfoot oil<sup>7</sup> that's real handy. Either you can cook them in a soup and eat them, or you can kind of crush them after you get the hoof material off, then hammer them up and boil them along with some of the other bones that you break up.

We most always saved the bones, even after we took the marrow out of them. We'd have a five gallon can full of smashed bones. We'd boil it, and the fat would come out. After the water cooled, the hard fat was setting on top of the water. We just broke it up and picked it off of there.

We liked that fat—it was especially nice. We used it the same way as any other fat, usually for frying.

**Did you use the black "fingernail" part of the hooves?**

I have, but not because I really needed to. I guess I have made snow goggles out of it, just to be doing something. You can also use it for assorted hobbies and things like that.

**How did you separate it from the bones?**

Once you get it cut loose around the top of the hoof, you can work a knife around the edge of it, and it's not hard to get off. I don't know if we ever boiled them first. I didn't always, I know that.

### Did you flatten them to take the curve out?

You can, if you boil them a little bit first. You put them between a couple of boards and clamp them together while they dry.

### Did you eat the brains?

Usually. I like the brain. But nowadays, with all this scare about Mad Cow Disease, I'd probably be a little leery of eating it.

### How did you cook it?

I just boiled it. I didn't make a practice of making a soup out of the brain. I'm not much of a hand for soup—I usually want something solid to eat. If I have broth left from boiling meat, I like to drink it.

If I were planning on tanning some of those skins, I'd take the brains out of the skull, spread them on a piece of cloth, and dry them. When I got ready to use them, I put the cloth with the dried brains into a kettle and boiled it until all of the fat came loose. It's a type of fat that mixes into the water pretty well, almost like fish oil. I used that in my soak water to soak the skin.

### Did you eat the stomach?

The bible<sup>8</sup> was the part that I usually cleaned up, and liked the best.

### I once saw a man cut up and eat a whole bible, with the contents and everything.

The bible is hard to clean. After I learned to eat the stomach contents, I never worried about cleaning it too much either.

### How did you learn to eat the contents?

I have to admit that it had a strong smell, and a strong taste too, but eventually I learned to like it. It's quite a treat with local people, Eskimo people. They save the big paunch with the contents still in it. Sometimes they put some liver or little pieces of meat inside, sew it back up, stick it under the bed, and leave it to ferment for a few days. They didn't want it to get too warm, but they didn't want it frozen either, or else it wouldn't ferment.

I had something of a reputation for trying to eat anything they could eat, so whenever they had some of that, they usually got it out and offered it to me. It was just in the belly hide, or it might have been laying on some pieces of wood. They just got it out from underneath the bed.

### Did you ever ferment any yourself?

Yes, the same way they did.

A caribou paunch swells up pretty quick once the animal dies. I'd just cut a little hole in it to let the gas out. Then I'd fish some of the contents out, put cut-up heart and liver back in there, sew it up, and lay it on a piece of hide under the bed or some other place where it would stay cool but not frozen.

### Did your family like it too?

No. Ricky might have eaten it with me; I don't remember. I know that Reenie<sup>9</sup> didn't like the smell of it and didn't like me to do it, so I didn't do it all the time.

Most white people would not appreciate that smell, at least I didn't. I don't like the smell of the guts of a caribou when I'm working on it

I don't either. Does the smell get stronger as it ferments?

Yes. Both the smell and the taste change as it ferments. After you get used to it, it's not bad.

Did you save lower intestine, with the globs of fat?

I did save the fat, and it's quite a job to pick it off. You can squeeze the pellets out, and I've done that just to get them out of the way while I was working on it. But I never did open it up and clean it.

We once made liver sausage out of the lowermost intestine. We turned it inside out by tucking one end inside itself and working it all the way through. That put the dirty side out, where we could wash it really well. Once it was clean, we snipped off the very ends, where there was a little contamination.

That gave us a nice clean casing with all those gobs of fat inside. Then we cooked liver and onions, mashed it up, and stuffed it inside. It was delicious, but we never did it again. We were usually much too busy in the fall time to work with it.

I never did do that. I remember one time splitting that intestine, and just kind of spreading it out and drying the whole thing. But there again, I didn't have a wife that was interested in doing that sort of thing. The farther she could stay away, the happier she was.

With me, fall was an especially difficult time because I'd be working in Kotzebue right up until freeze-up, sometimes after freeze-up, and when I got home it was time to fish under the ice and hunt and haul wood. Sometimes I had wood cut from the spring, but not always.

Did you use the kidneys?

Kidneys are not one of my favorite parts of the animal, but we did eat them. We just split them and boiled them.

The joke used to be that to cook kidneys, you just boil the piss out of them. I found that even after boiling, they still tasted like piss.

We just ate them anyway. The only part of an animal that we threw away was the lungs. Quite often they went on the garden, and sometimes I'd cut them up in little pieces and cook them up with the dog feed.

What was your very favorite part?

Tongue. There is no comparison between a beef tongue and a caribou tongue. A caribou tongue is much better.

I found that the same was true of the liver.

I don't have any trouble eating the liver.

Do you like beef liver?

Yes. When I was a kid, we quite often raised our own beef and hogs, and of course we didn't waste any of it. I don't know if I ever had any beef bought from the market when I was growing up.

**Let's get back to sinew. How did you save it?**

The first thing you do is cut the inner skin under the hide that covers the sinew tissue. Both sides of the strip of sinew are fastened together right where the backbone fastens to the pelvis. You work your knife it to get that part loose.

When you get that part up a little bit, you cut it lengthwise to make a hole for your finger. You cut it loose from the pelvis and start pulling it up, scraping the edge of your knife under it.

It's easier if you've taken the shoulders off and have been careful not to cut the end of the sinew at the same time. But even if you weren't, you can usually grab it and pull it out when you get up to the tip. You lay it on the side of the animal and scrape it as clean as you can. Then you wad it up, put it in your pack, and take it home.

When you get home, you thaw it out and unroll it. Sometimes I washed it a little bit. Even if you don't wash it, it's got some very sticky juices in it. You can stick it onto the side of a building or onto a cache leg, and it'll just stay there by itself. After it's dry, you peel it off and put it away.

When you get ready to use it you can start peeling little fibers off the sides, and use each piece as thread. The tip at the shoulder end will be so thin that you can thread it through the small eye in a needle. The fiber gets bigger toward the end, where you put the knot.

If your moccasins get wet, the sinew swells up and seals the hole. Ordinary fabric thread doesn't do that.

Peeling sinew threads was a substitute for knitting with the Eskimo women when they were visiting or whatever. They would be pulling the sinew apart and laying strands back together, twisting two or three of them together, depending on what they wanted it for.

It's something to watch them do that. They twist one side and hold it, twist the other side, and roll them together as far as they'd go, or let them twist together, and do it again.

**I remember seeing them wetting the strands with their lips and rolling them on the top of their thighs.**

I've seen them do it different ways—sometimes on the thigh, sometimes on the cheek, sometimes on the arm.

**Then what would they do?**

They'd coil it up and put it into their sewing basket until they needed it. Sometimes they'd lay quite a few of those strands together, side by side, and wrap a little sinew around the whole bundle. When they wanted a strand, they'd just pull one out. That way they would have enough to sew for a whole evening without having to stop to make up more.

**That was in the days when they used to make mukluks.**

Yeah [chuckles]. That wasn't before my time with them, and I'm sure it wasn't before your time either.

Things really began changing with Lyndon Johnson's Great Society programs in the 1960s.

That's when they started wearing shoe packs with felt liners.

I remember seeing women splitting walrus hides at Wales in 1974, like splitting a sheet of paper into two sheets half as thick. It was to make covering for a skin boat.

I have never seen that done, but I know that it was a delicate process, and took some expertise.

Is there anything more you want to say about caribou?

We used to cook the heads until the meat was more or less falling off. There is a lot of tissue on a head. When you boil the meat, the broth would set up as it cooled, and would have little pieces of meat you had cut off from the head. That's what we called "head cheese". I don't know if there is another name when people are using domestic animals. Anyway, that was one of our favorite dishes.

Did you eat it cold?

Sometimes. At other times, we'd heat it up.

Would it melt when you heated it?

Yes.

My Swedish relatives made something similar out of veal, called *kalvsylta*. They had a particular mold for it.

One of the special things about caribou is that it has a hollow hair that tends to break off. The Eskimo have a saying that it's a hungry, cold camp if there's no caribou hair in your coffee and everything else.

Did you use the caribou bones?

I did, but it wasn't part of the local culture. I knew that the native people in the past had used the thicker bones to make arrow heads and projectile points of one kind or another.

All I did was play around with it. I'd cut the bone off flat, right at the end where it was joined to the next bone below it, and of course it would be hollow. I would cut that off a little ways above the swelling and make it into a toothpick bowl or a little bowl to stand things in. That's all I did with it.

How did you make net sinkers?

I'd cut pieces of antler anywhere from six to ten inches long, depending on the net and usually depending on the antler too. I'd dig away the porous, web-shaped material inside the antler. With the curved side up, I'd drill holes into the antler right at the ends. Usually I'd just put a piece of cloth through that hole and tie it to the sinker line.

I had quite a bit of battery lead. I'd melt some of that and pour it into the end of some of the bigger ones to make them a little heavier. About every third or fourth sinker would

have some lead in it. That way I didn't have to fool around tying a rock on every so often.

I used to use antler sinkers, but they sure wanted to tangle. Later, when I had more money, I went to lead line.

Yeah, that was an easier way to go, although lead line sometimes kinked too. If you make the antlers long enough and cut the ends off at an angle, they're not so bad about getting tangled.

---

1) This essay stems from a series of telephone conversations that Ole Wik had with Oliver between December 2007 and February 2008. Highlighted text indicates remarks made by Ole.

2) Adapted from "Butchering Time", by Eleanor Hodge:

Slits were made in the back of the hind legs. The ends of the "Gamble Stick" were slipped in these slots, then the hog was raised off the ground—head down. The hog was splashed with more water to wash off any dirt or hair. Then it was slit down the middle and the entrails were removed.

<http://www.jchs.mvn.net/Articles.html>. Jefferson County Pioneer Association, Mount Vernon, Illinois.

3) We considered the brisket to be the sternum and the attached intercostal cartilages, as shown in gray in this image of the human rib cage. A knife will easily separate the cartilages from the bony ribs.

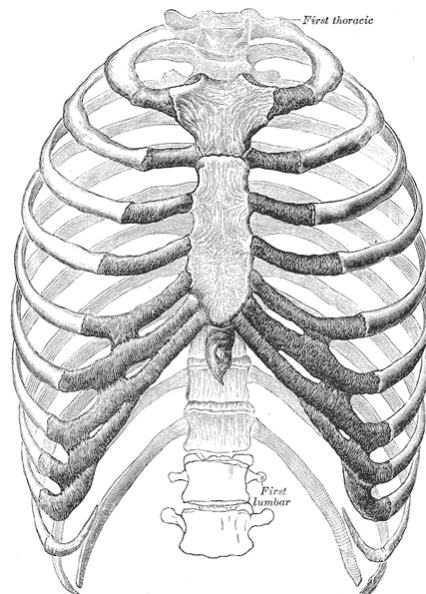


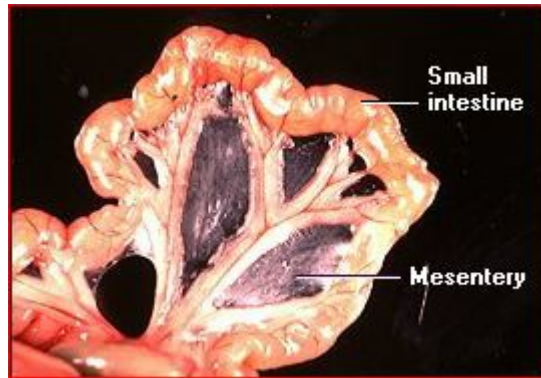
Image: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Human\\_rib\\_cage](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Human_rib_cage)

As Oliver suggested elsewhere, a brisket from a skinny animal is nothing to write home about. We relished the fat and tender meat attached to the cartilage, rather than the thick,



tough muscle that covers this area. In commerce, that muscle is usually sold as corned beef brisket.

- 4) *Ichauraks*: Mesenteries, layers of peritoneum which we relished for their fat.



*Mesentery. Image source:*

<http://www.vivo.colostate.edu/hbooks/pathphys/digestion/smallgut/anatomy.html>

- 5) The backstraps lie along either side of the top of the spine. The shorter tenderloins lie along either side of the underside of the spine, near the pelvis.



Image source: <http://www.thefoodinmybeard.com/2009/11/100-free-range-organic.html>

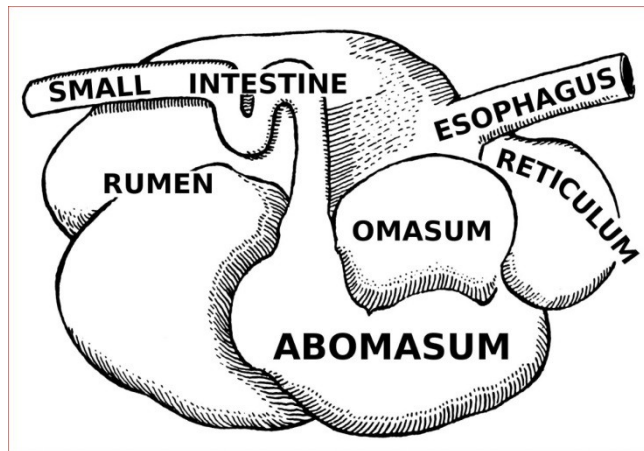
- 6) Keith Jones, who by that time had moved with his family to the southern Sierra Nevada.

- 7) From [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Neatsfoot\\_oil](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Neatsfoot_oil):

Neatsfoot oil is a yellow oil rendered and purified from the shin bones and feet (but not the hooves) of cattle. "Neat" in the oil's name comes from an old name for cattle. Neatsfoot oil is used as a conditioning, softening and preservative agent for leather. In the 18th century, it was also used medicinally as a topical application for dry scaly skin conditions.

8) From <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Omasum>:

The omasum, also known as the bible, the fardel, the manyplies and the psalterium, is the third compartment of the stomach in ruminants.



9) Oliver's wife, Lorene Cameron.