

MAKING A RABBIT SKIN BLANKET

By Oliver Cameron
with Ole Wik

When you made your rabbit blanket, how did you treat the skins? I understand they tear easily.¹

I took a piece of a log and trimmed it off so that a rabbit skin case² could be pulled down over the end of it. The neck part was much smaller than the bottom, of course.

I left a part of the bottom end of the piece of wood sticking down, an inch in diameter I guess. It went loosely into a 1-1/4" hole drilled into the top of my workbench. I put the green hides on that stick.

I cut them when they were fresh off the rabbit. I would trim the big end of the rabbit skin a little bit with a sharp knife and pull it over the stick. Then I'd just cut a strip about an inch wide. That stick was free to swing around, so I'd just cut round and round until I ran out of skin.

Then I'd make a little ball of it, and start adding more when I got another rabbit. Eventually I had about 60 rabbit skins wrapped on that ball. I kept it outside, frozen.

Were they still moist?

Right.

Did you put the green side down as you added the skin to the ball?

When you cut the strips they roll together, making a kind of rope with fur on all sides. They coil up, and look just like a strip of fur.

What was the length of a strip from one rabbit?

Maybe six feet.

How does it dry out?

I brought the frozen ball inside, let it thaw, and wove the blanket. I just worked on it in the house there. After that, they dried up real quick.

How did you weave them?

I made a frame, and then stretched a string inside of that frame. The string was the same shape as the frame, but suspended inside of it. I tied it to the frame with little pieces of string.

Then I started in one corner. I probably sewed the end of the first strip of fur to or around that inside string. Using my fingers as a gauge, I took ahold of the string with my fingers, and let the strip of rabbit fur come under my fingers. I don't remember if I made a couple of half hitches onto the string again. Then I moved my hand over and continued across until I ran out of rabbit skin.

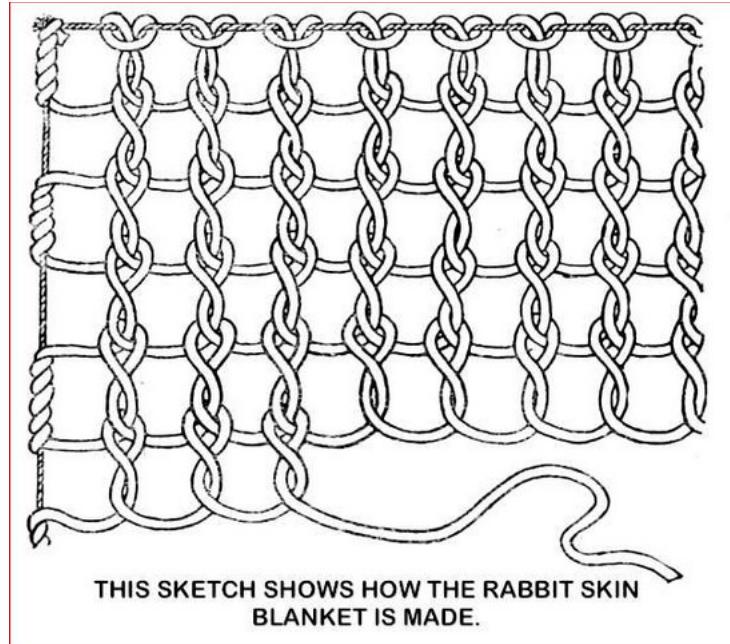


Image from Elmer Kreps's book *Woodcraft*, p. 49 (see footnote 3)

Then I sewed the next strip of rabbit skin together with a couple of stitches, using small needles and dental floss. When I got to the far side, I took maybe three wraps around the twine that ran the other direction. Then I started back.

I would make a twist and put the end of the strip through the loose loop that I had there, and make another twist and do the same thing so that I was going back and sort of weaving that strip of rabbit hide into the last set of holes above it until I got across on the other side. Then I'd take two or three wraps around the selvage on the other side and start back across again.

Did you twist the skin?

You take end of a strip of fur and push it down in through the loop. When it comes back out, you loop it around itself a couple of times, so you have a new loop for your next pass between each stitch.

When you go through the loop at the end, instead of going over to the next loop, you bring it up behind where you went through. Go around twice. When it dries, those stitches where they go around the cord are drawn up pretty tight.

Do you stretch the strips of skin as you go?

No, I don't stretch them. They get stretched just a little bit when I wind them on the ball.

I'd let it dry for a while. Then I'd cut the little strings holding the selvage end, take it out of the frame, and there it was.

You can poke your finger through that kind of a blanket most anyplace. Also, if you use it, hairs are going to stick to your clothes, and you're going to look like a rabbit.

Did you put a cloth cover over it?

I think I used burlap.

Wouldn't that be kind of coarse?

There's burlap, and there's burlap. All you want to do is sandwich the blanket in between to make a quilt. I intended to open up some bags and cover it, but didn't. I just used to lie down sometimes and pull it over me. It was snug.

Was there any smell to it?

No, not when it was dry. I suppose it had a scent, but I never noticed it.

What were the dimensions?

About 4' wide and 7' long, taking sixty rabbit skins approximately. When I got around to making the frame, I just figured I'd go as far as I could, with the skins I had.

Was that your own design?

No. We can thank Elmer Kreps again.³

Cased rabbit skins are pretty handy just by themselves. I have pulled fresh skins over my foot, with the fur side in. That makes a good stocking inside a mukluk.

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.

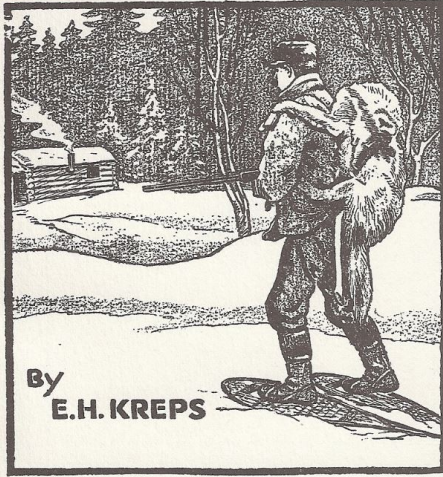
2) A cased hide is one that has been removed in one piece from an animal, then placed snugly on a specially-shaped board or wire frame for drying, fur side in. Oliver skinned the rabbits in this same manner, but cut the hides round and round into strips rather than drying them.



Image: http://www.michigan.gov/documents/dnr/TEM_Chapt_17_206599_7.pdf

3) E.H. Kreps. *Woodcraft* (Columbus: A.R. Harding, 1978), 47-50.

WOODCRAFT



By
E.H. KREPS