

Trapping Beaver and Processing Their Fur

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Trapping Beaver and Processing Their Fur¹

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INTRODUCTION

IN THE 1930's, beaver populations in Alabama were reduced to about 500 animals as a result of trapping, hunting, and the demand for fur. Today beaver are plentiful in Alabama, primarily on the large river systems in the southern half of the State. A reduction in trapper interest that followed an extended period when trapping was prohibited and when fur prices were poor, combined with a stocking program are credited for the population increase. The beaver's return has generally been beneficial to wildlife, but also has created some problems for a number of landowners. Some of the landowners seek to eliminate beaver on their land by using various methods, many of which have been unsuccessful. Some research efforts have been directed toward the development of reproductive inhibitors and practical poisoning techniques for them.

The most prudent approach to animal damage control problems is annual harvest, particularly where such harvests can be made at no public expense. Considering the recreational aspects of trapping, the income potential, and the edible meat, the beaver is an animal that lends itself to population control through trapper harvest. This approach promotes the use of nuisance populations as a renewable resource, rather than wastefully controlling them as pests.

Trapping as an effective means of reducing beaver populations has been demonstrated time and time again throughout the history and range of the beaver.

It was the search for beaver and other furbearing animals that opened up many sections of North America. As long as prices for beaver fur remained high, the laws of supply and demand ensured an abundance of trappers; however, with lower prices over the past 20 years, fewer people, particularly young men, have shown an interest in trapping. Lower prices also have created the need for greater efficiency in trapping, skinning, and handling the fur to make a profit.

It is the purpose of this publication to present efficient procedures and techniques for trapping southern beaver and handling their fur. It is hoped that this information, when supplemented with annual fur profit reports, will stimulate trapper interest that can be directed toward utilization of nuisance beaver populations.

TRAPPING SOUTHERN BEAVER

Although opinions vary among trappers regarding the best trap to use, those who have tried them tend to agree that the 330 conibear is the best trap available for southern beaver. This trap usually kills instantly and is almost 100 percent effective in preventing escapes. Their use should help reduce anti-trapping sentiment that is growing in some states.

Conibear traps are highly adaptable for water sets in both shallow and deep water, either partially above or beneath the surface. Since drowning sets are unnecessary with the conibear, a trapline can usually be set quickly and will require fewer traps. In addition to the conibear traps, anyone seriously considering beaver trapping should have hip boots or waders, a pair of setting tongs, a small hatchet or axe, some rolls of wire, and wire cutters (Figure 1). With this equipment, a trapping license, written permission from the landowner, and enough cold weather to ensure that the fur will be prime, you are ready to go to the field.

¹ A contribution of the Alabama Cooperative Wildlife Research Unit, Auburn University Agricultural Experiment Station, Game and Fish Division, Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and Wildlife Management Institute cooperating.

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FIG. 1. Equipment for beaver trapping may include a small hand axe, peck basket, hip boots, wire, traps, and setting tongs.

Since temperatures are generally mild in Alabama, trappers seldom have to contend with ice trapping. Therefore conibear traps can be used effectively in two or three major types of sets. One set involves placing the trap on top of or immediately below a beaver dam at an active crossing. If the dam is new (characterized by an abundance of freshly peeled limbs and brush) the trap may be placed in the crossing on top of the dam. In such situations the trap blends well with the shaggy appearance of the dam (figures 2 and 3). Conibear traps work well when placed in crossings below older dams which are usually characterized by rooted vegetation in the accumulated mud and organic matter (Figure 4). In another type set conibear traps placed in shallow runways between bank dens, lodges, and feeding areas are very productive. Beaver generally



FIG. 2. New dams characterized by the presence of freshly peeled sticks can be trapped effectively by placing traps in crossings on the crest of the dams.



FIG. 3. New dams across running streams also can be trapped effectively by placing a trap where beaver cross.

swim from one area to another on the surface, so the trap should be positioned with the top of the trap 2 to 3 inches above the surface, the trigger mechanism beneath the water, and the prongs sticking upward (Figure 5). Traps should be wired to a secure stake, and, if placed in streams that are subject to high run-off, a piece of wire should be run from the trap ring to a substantial tie on either bank, preferably down stream. This arrangement will prevent the loss of traps during high water and occasionally may prevent the loss of a trap and beaver to feral dogs.

Although some trappers set conibear traps with their hands, it is not recommended. Setting tongs have proven to be very helpful, particularly in cold weather, both for setting traps (Figure 6) and for removing beaver from them.



FIG. 4. Older dams characterized by rooted vegetation can be trapped effectively by placing traps in crossings below the dam.



FIG. 5. Traps placed in runs between lodges or dens and feeding sites are usually productive.



FIG. 6. Setting tongs are very helpful in setting conibear traps as well as for removing beaver from them.

SKINNING BEAVER

The feet and tail should be removed at the hairline. This can be done with a small axe and a suitable chopping block. A cut is then made just through the skin from the base of the tail up the belly to the center of the lower lip (figures 7 and 8). The edge of the skin along this cut is held between the thumb and forefinger and an effort made to "clean skin" the outer 2 inches of the pelt (Figure 9), leaving as much of the fat tissue as possible on the carcass. Then, skinning more quickly and leaving more muscle and fat (rough skinning), the pelt is cut away from the belly.

With the feet removed, it is easier to skin around the stump ends by pushing them up with the last three fingers while rolling downward the skin held between the thumb and index finger (Figure 10).

The beaver can be rolled on its side and the pelt cut away to the center of the back from the neck to the tail (Figure 11). The skinned half of the pelt is then laid back over the carcass and the beaver turned end for end (figures 12 and 13). The other half of the pelt from the neck down is skinned around to the back in the same manner, working around the leg stumps in the same manner described above (Figure 10). The carcass is then rolled over on the belly and the pelt lifted and cut away from the base of the tail toward the head (Figure 14). Pulling the pelt away from the carcass aids in skinning the head, particularly around the ears and eyes (Figure 15). The pelt should be hung up or spread out fur side up to allow the fur to dry.

"Rough skinned" pelts with their extra tissue may be frozen. They can be thawed and fleshed of fat and muscle tissue and dried later. If they are frozen, they should be folded over fur-to-fur and put into



FIG. 7 & 8. After removing the feet and tail at the hairline a cut is made from the base of the tail up the belly to the center of the lower lip.

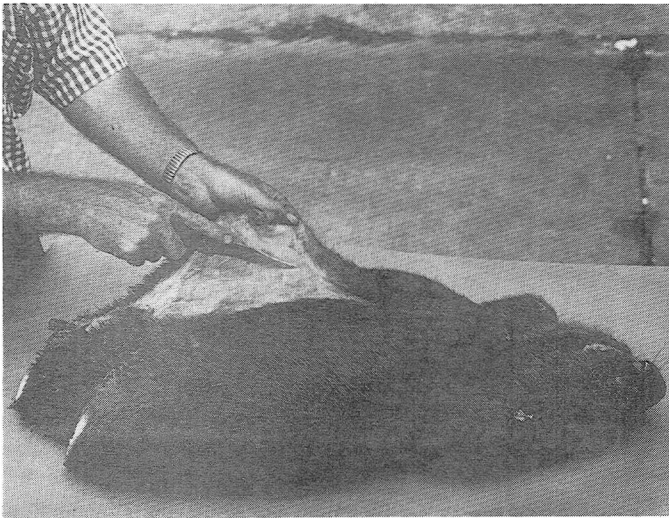


FIG. 9. Efforts should be made to "clean skin" the pelt along this cut. This will limit damage to this thin area during fleshing.

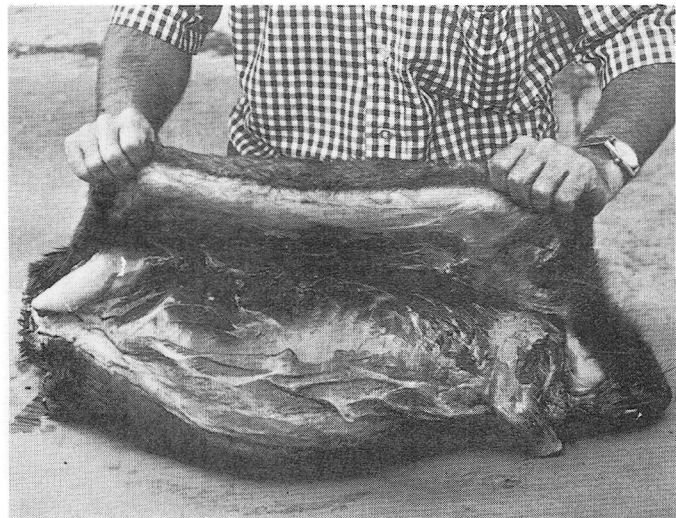


FIG. 12. The pelt of the half skinned beaver is laid back over the carcass.

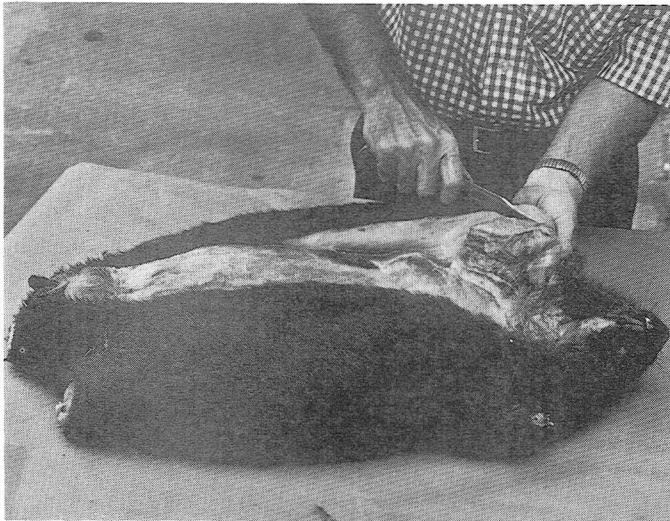


FIG. 10. With the feet removed the legs can be skinned easily by rolling the pelt down and forcing the leg upward.



FIG. 13. The beaver is then turned end for end.



FIG. 11. Then skinning more rapidly the pelt is cut away to the center of the back.

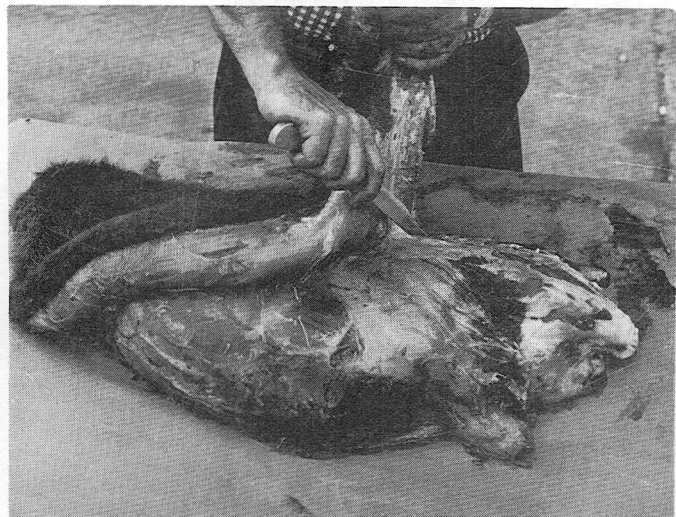


FIG. 14. After skinning out the other half of the pelt, the carcass is rolled on its belly and the pelt cut away working from the base of the tail toward the head.

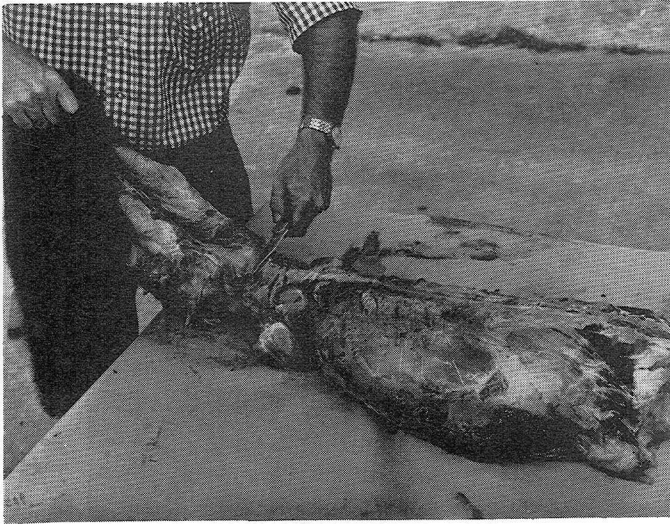


FIG. 15. Pulling the pelt away from the carcass with one hand while cutting with the other aids in skinning the head particularly around the ears and eyes.

individual plastic bags. After skinning 30 or 40, most individuals can skin a good sized beaver in a very few minutes. The best time recorded locally was 3.5 minutes on a large beaver.

The paired castor glands located in front of the anus are used in the perfume industry and are well worth saving. They can be removed by making one cut across the abdomen just above the glands. The glands can be peeled away from the adhering connective tissue with the fingers and hung over a wire to dry for about 10 days. They can be sold along with the fur.

FLESHING THE BEAVER PELT

The next step in processing a beaver pelt is to flesh it over a rounded and pointed fleshing beam, which is usually about 5 feet long and anchored in such a position that it forms an angle of approximately 45 degrees between the floor and the chest of the individual doing the fleshing. Fleshing beams can be made quickly from butt end board slabs. They can be made to taper gradually for use on a variety of small furbearers or may be broader, which some trappers prefer for beaver. Tools designed especially for fleshing pelts on a beam are available from trapper supply houses, but a carpenter's drawing knife with a 10- to 12-inch blade works well (Figure 16).

The center of the back of the beaver pelt is placed on the point of the beam. A towel placed between the chest of the individual fleshing and the point of beam will help hold the pelt in place. Starting near the tip of the beam, a swath of muscle and fat 1 to 3 inches wide should be cut from the center of the back down to the tail. The blade is held at an angle so that the beveled surface is almost parallel with the fleshing beam. It is pushed downward and

sideways to produce a slicing action. Care should be taken to slide the pelt up on the beam frequently so that only the outer foot of the beam is used (Figure 17). The pelt should then be turned and a similar swath removed from the center of the back up to the nose. Then re-position the pelt and flesh a strip from the center of the back out to each side. At this point the pelt has four unfleshed pie-shaped areas (Figure 18). Each quarter of the unfleshed pelt should be fleshed clean. Care should be taken at thin areas near the belly and leg holes to avoid cutting the pelt (Figure 19). Fat tissues on these areas can usually be pushed away from the pelt, whereas the muscle tissue on the back and the thick fat tissue on the base of the tail have to be sliced away with a downward and sliding motion of the knife. After fleshing one or two beaver, sufficient skill with the knife is usually developed so that pelts are seldom damaged (Figure 20).

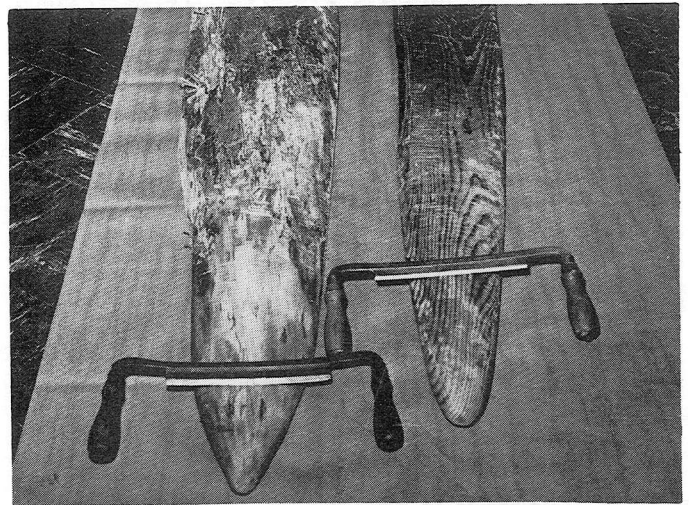


FIG. 16. Fleshing beams and drawing knives such as these are extremely helpful for removing flesh and fat from skins.



FIG. 17. Using a downward slicing motion, flesh and fat are cut away from the pelt.

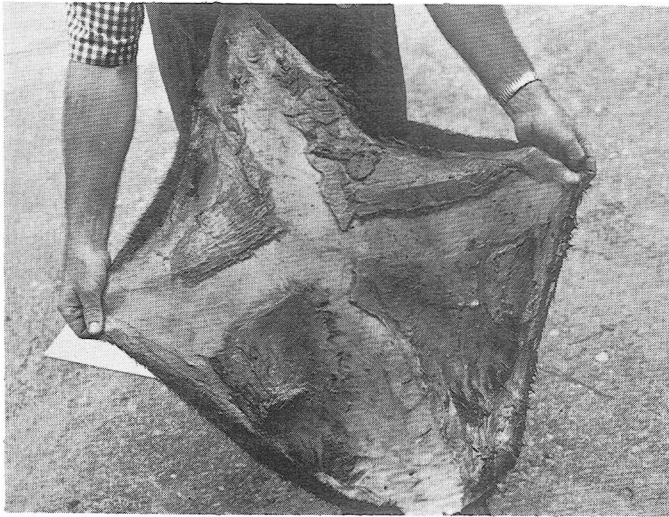


FIG. 18. Starting in the center of the pelt each time, swaths of fat and muscle are cut away toward the head, tail, and each side. Then each quarter is fleshed clean.



FIG. 19. Care should be taken around the belly and leg holes to avoid cutting or tearing the pelt. This is accomplished by holding the knife at a flatter angle.



FIG. 20. After skinning a few beaver, cleaned fleshed pelts such as this one can be produced with relative ease.

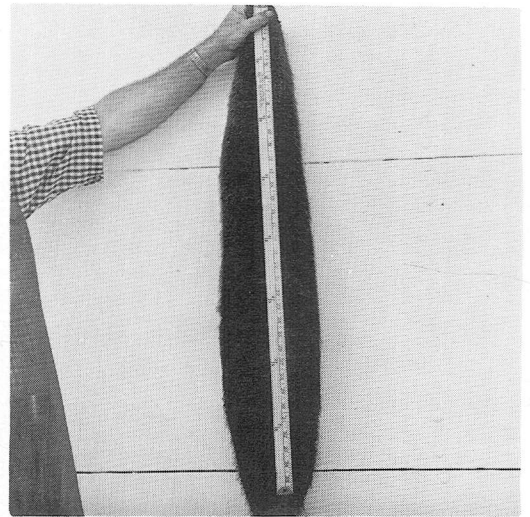


FIG. 21. The pelt is hung up by the nose and measured to determine how large it should be stretched.

STRETCHING AND DRYING THE PELT

Procedures used for stretching and drying pelts vary with different trappers. Most Canadian trappers stretch beaver in an oval shape according to a pattern provided by their Government. Procedures that were tried and work well are as follows: After the pelt is fleshed, ensure that the fur is dry, otherwise moisture will be trapped between the skin and the drying board to which it is nailed. This moisture can cause the pelt to dry slowly during periods of damp weather and may result in fur slippage. Once the fur side is dry, it is ready to be stretched. Three foot square sheets of $\frac{1}{2}$ -inch or thicker plywood make good stretching boards.

Pelts may be stretched either round or slightly oval with the approximate size determined by making one measurement and some simple additions. The pelt is hung up by the nose and measured from top to bottom (Figure 21). This distance plus half this distance plus 2 inches totaled and divided by 2 should give you the diameter of the circle into which the pelt should stretch. For example, if our pelt measures 30 inches, we add 30 plus 15 plus 2 which is 47, which divided by 2 is $23\frac{1}{2}$ inches; the approximate diameter that the pelt should be stretched. A circle of this diameter then can be drawn on the board. Four lines should be drawn to intersect the arc of the circle at the 12, 3, 6, and 9 o'clock positions to provide a reference point for the first four nails used in the stretching process. The pelt is then laid out fur side down in the circle and the nose and center of the tail nailed along the circle at the 12 and 6 o'clock positions respectively (Figure 22). The sides are then nailed at the 3 and 9 o'clock positions (Figure 23). The skin is then grasped at points midway between these four

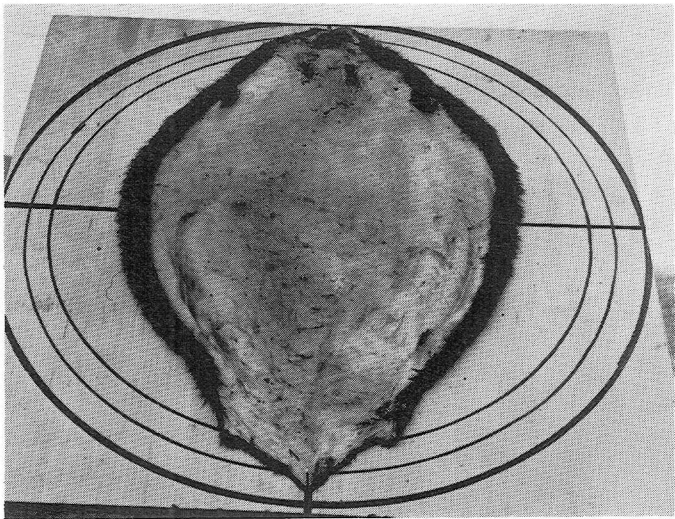


FIG. 22. After the fur side has dried, the pelt is nailed on a board inside an appropriately sized circle. The nose and center of the tail are nailed at 12 and 6 o'clock positions.

nails, stretched to the edge of the circle and nailed (Figure 24). The skin should be stretched and nailed at points midway between other nails until nails are spaced at approximately one inch intervals completely around the pelt (Figure 25). Any fat left around the leg holes should be trimmed away and the leg holes closed with three or four nails (Figure 25). The stretched pelt can be further cleaned of fat and moisture with a fleshing tool, a paint scraper on which the sharp corners have been rounded, or an old curved knife blade (Figure 26). Pelts may be nailed on both sides of a drying board. A 55-gallon drum with the top cut out provides a good working platform to accomplish this at a con-

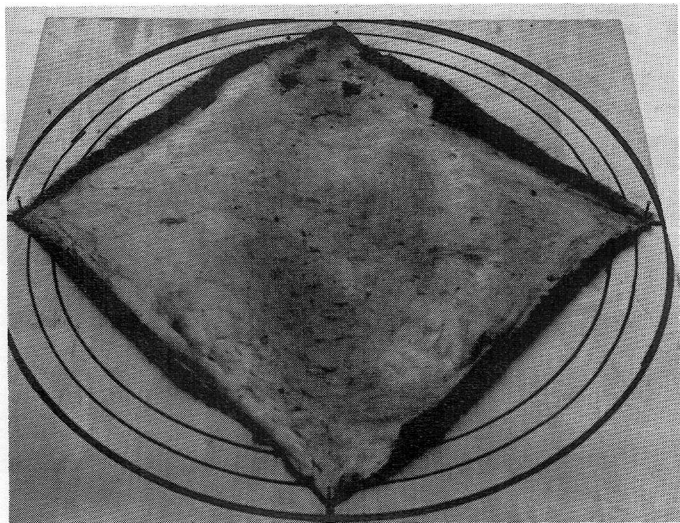


FIG. 23. The pelt is squered by nailing the sides at the 3 and 9 o'clock positions.

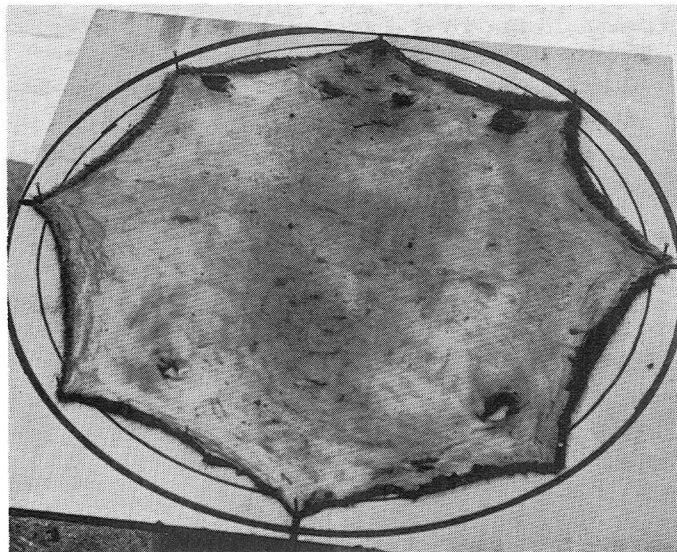


FIG. 24. Points along the edge of the pelt midway between the first four nails are pulled to the edge of the circle and nailed.

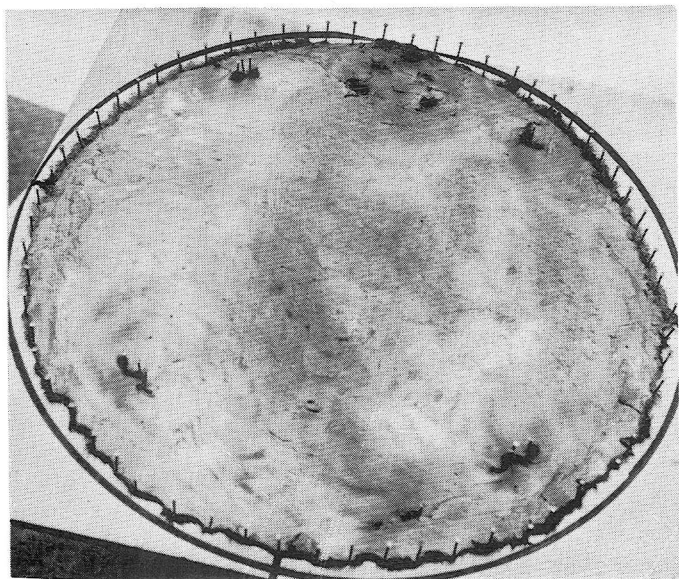


FIG. 25. Continuing this process, the edge of the pelt is rounded until nails are about an inch apart around the pelt.

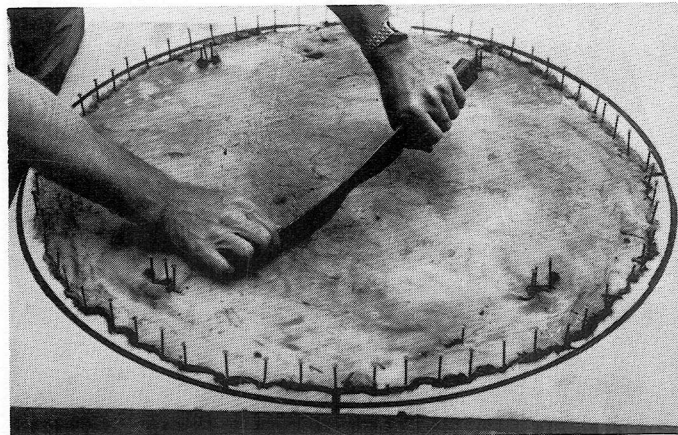


FIG. 26. Using a rounded knife blade or other suitable tool, excess fat and moisture should be removed from the pelt to aid in drying.

venient level. Drying boards should be placed on end against and perpendicular to a wall at least 6 inches apart. Under favorable drying conditions, skins should be sufficiently dry to remove them from the boards within 7 to 10 days. Fans and artificial heat can reduce the drying time to as little as 2 days.

Current information on storing fur, wrapping it

for shipment, fur auctions, and names and addresses of buyers paying the best prices can be obtained from your local and national trapper associations.

Beaver meat is good to eat and has been sold for about \$2.00-\$4.00 per carcass. It can be barbecued or baked whole or quartered. The hams also are very good sliced, battered, and fried.

ADDITIONAL RECOMMENDED READING

BUSHEY, D. 1970. Trapping and Handling Beaver and Otter, 1st Edition, RD 1, Box 341-A, Valrico, Fla. 45 pp.

FAILOR, P. L. 1974. Pennsylvania Trapping and Predator Control Methods, 7th Ed. Penn. Game Commission, Harrisburg, Penn. 96 pp.

KENNAMER, E. F. 1950. Toe-Pinching for Profit. Auburn University A.P.I. Cir. 5; 40 pp.