

Caping for a shoulder mount

Preparing your cape for taxidermy



Hunter LEAP

LEARNING, EDUCATION
& ACCREDITATION
PROGRAM



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NSW DPIRD Hunting

Hunter Education & Training

hunter.leap@dpiird.nsw.gov.au

dpi.nsw.gov.au/hunting

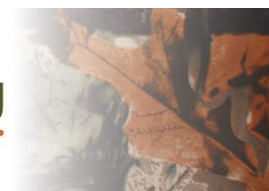
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About regulated hunting in NSW

DPIRD Hunting is part of the Fisheries and Forestry division within the NSW Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development. The unit is responsible for administering the [Game and Feral Animal Control Act 2002](#) (the Act) and the [Game and Feral Animal Control Regulation 2022](#) (the Regulation).

Benefits of holding a licence

NSW Game Hunting Licence holders have access to:

- \$25 million public liability insurance cover (recreational hunting licences)
 - over 2 million hectares of public land (Restricted licences)
 - opportunity to take part in the Native Game Bird Management Program
 - specialised education and training opportunities through the Hunter Learning, Education & Accreditation Program (LEAP)
 - all the benefits of a peer network of responsible, ethical and safe hunters.
-

Extra requirements for Restricted licences

To ensure public land hunters are responsible, competent and have a heightened awareness of legislation, public safety and animal welfare, some extra requirements apply.

Applicants must [complete the R-Licence Accreditation Course](#), either online or in-person, and [be a member of an Approved Hunting Organisation](#).

About this course

DPIRD Hunting provides comprehensive training through the Hunter Learning, Education and Accreditation Program (LEAP) to educate and encourage hunters to hunt safely and ethically.

When you harvest an animal that is worthy of a trophy mount, careful preparation of the skin is vital. This will ensure the cape is not ruined or does not spoil before it arrives at the taxidermist.

This online training course provides an introduction and overview to the caping process. For a more comprehensive learning experience, we encourage hunters participate in an in-person training course offered by your local Hunter LEAP provider.

You will learn how to properly prepare and care for your cape before delivery to a taxidermist. You will also learn how to safely use sharp knives and tools when caping.

At the completion of the course, you will:

- have a basic understanding of the art of taxidermy
- know where to make the initial cuts
- be able to properly cape the face of an animal
- understand the splitting process
- be able to salt your cape correctly.

There are many methods of caping used throughout the world. The process featured in this short course is a popular and widely accepted method amongst Australian hunters and taxidermists. You may have another method that you feel more comfortable using.

The Caping for a Shoulder Mount course is one of several DPIRD Hunting education and training initiatives focusing on hunting safety and field hunting techniques. Formal training, however, is just the first step in understanding how to be a responsible and ethical hunter. Consistent learning and practice will help you achieve the necessary competency.

What is taxidermy?

Having a hard-earned trophy animal mounted by a taxidermist is becoming increasingly popular. Taxidermy is the process of producing a life-like and accurate representation of an animal for display. The word 'taxidermy' is derived from two ancient Greek words

- **taxis**, meaning movement, and
- **derma**, meaning skin.

Together, the words mean 'movement of skin'.

Usually, the actual skin (including the fur, feathers or scales) is removed from the animal, then preserved and mounted over an artificial body or form. In other cases, such as fish taxidermy or tusk reproduction, the specimen is completely reproduced using manufactured materials. By manipulating and adjusting the skin, a professional taxidermist can achieve a lifelike reproduction of that animal.

In modern taxidermy, the only natural parts of the animal used are the skin and the antlers, horns or teeth. Most other parts are artificial, including glass for eyes, modelling clay for muscles and a polyurethane form for the body.

Modern taxidermy involves many crafts such as woodworking, casting, sculpting, sewing and modelling. The taxidermist must also possess great skills as an artist to produce a quality mount that mirrors the shape, alignment and structure of the anatomy of that particular species.

When choosing a taxidermist, always ask to see examples of their work. Alternatively, get a referral from another hunter.

Most common mounts



Figure 1: Shoulder mount



Figure 2: Wall pedestal mount



Figure 3: Pedestal mount

Note the extra cape that is required for a pedestal mount.

How to ensure a properly prepared cape

To ensure a good mount, it's essential that you prepare the skin properly for the taxidermist. Once you have chosen your taxidermist, discuss with them in advance any special requirements for the cape.

Hair slip

Hair slip is the most common problem encountered by taxidermists. Hair slip results from the growth of harmful bacteria on the skin. As they multiply, the bacteria secrete enzymes which break down the skin fibres. The skin decays causing the hair follicles to become loose and easily fall out.

Hair slip is extremely difficult to repair and usually results in the cape having to be replaced with another. If you prepare your cape properly, you can avoid this disappointment.



Figure 4: Hair slip on a tanned cape

Field preparation

You will need to begin caping as soon as possible after you harvest the animal. Heat speeds up bacterial growth and this will ruin the cape.

In many instances, the cape and head must be removed in the field and the final face caping can be completed back at your camp or home. This should only be attempted in cool weather. Excessive heat or sun exposure will ruin the cape within a matter of hours.

Before you begin caping, suspend the animal off the ground for easier processing.

If you're unable to do this, lay the animal on its stomach with all four legs spread apart to disperse its weight. Never drag the animal along the ground as this results in hair being pulled from the cape.

Safety considerations

Before you begin removing the cape from the animal, there are a few safety concerns that you need to be aware of.

1. Disease and parasitic infections

Wild animals can carry a variety of diseases and parasites that can be harmful to humans. Hunters are at an increased risk of exposure to these health concerns.

The most common are:

- Q-fever
- Hydatid disease
- Trichinella
- Brucellosis
- Ticks.

To reduce the risk of contracting any of these health issues, wear disposable latex gloves and always wash your hands with a hospital grade hand cleaner if you come into contact with blood or any other body fluids.

It is also recommended that anyone who handles any type of domestic and wild animals should be vaccinated against Q-fever. Please visit your local health care professional for advice

2. Handle your knife safely

Knives and scalpels are the most important tools for caping a trophy animal. They can also be extremely dangerous if not cared for or handled correctly.

Handy hint: Always use a razor sharp knife

A safe knife is a sharp knife. Using a blunt knife requires a stronger grip and more force to make the cut, rather than allowing the sharp blade to do the work. The extra force you need for a blunt knife can easily result in the knife slipping away from the hide and cutting or stabbing you.

Most knife accidents are superficial, such as a minor cut to a hand or finger. Some injuries may need urgent medical attention such as stitches or even surgery.

Common injuries include:

- cuts to the non-knife holding hand or arm
- cuts to the knife-holding hand when the hand slips forward off the handle
- cuts to another person who is assisting.

Top 6 knife-handling safety tips

1. Always use a razor-sharp knife.
2. Angle the blade away from your hands and body.
3. Keep your fingers away from the blade by curling them under your hand.
4. Always cut away from your body.
5. Make sure your hands are clean and free from fat or blood as this can cause your hand to slip from the handle.
6. If you become distracted, put the knife down until you are able to focus on the task.



Figure 5: Razor sharp knife

3. Clean your equipment

It is good practice to clean your equipment before and after each use.

- Always make sure that your hands and knives are clean before you begin.
- Wash your hands with a hospital grade hand cleaner and water.
- Clean all your knives and equipment with the proper cleaning chemicals or hot water.
- Dipping knives into hot water at 82 degrees Celsius or above for at least 8 seconds will kill most harmful bacteria.
- Alcohol based hand sanitiser or anti-bacterial wipes are good alternative for in the field.
- Clean your hands and equipment regularly or when they become soiled.
- Dry your hands and equipment with clean paper towel.



Figure 6: Clean equipment

How to cape your trophy

Assembling knives and other tools

To make the capping process easier and safer you need to have variety of tools on hand, including the following:

- disposable latex gloves
- surgical scalpel and spare blades
- broad-blade skinning knife
- butcher's or skinning knife
- flat bladed screwdriver
- ear pliers
- sharpening steel or stone
- fine flossy salt.

A surgical scalpel is one of the best knives to use for fine, detailed work (such as removing the skin from the eyes, nose and lips) and for splitting.

Knives quickly dull when cutting through hair and debris such as dirt and soil. Use a good quality sharpening steel or diamond steel to keep the knife sharp during capping.



Figure 7: Scalpel knife



Figure 8: Butcher's/skinning knife



Figure 9: Round steel



Figure 10: Ear pliers



Figure 11: Flat blade screwdriver



Figure 12: Spare scalpel blades

Making the initial body cuts

Use your butcher's or skinning knife for the initial body cuts.



Figure 13: Abdominal cut

Cut 1: Abdominal cut

The first cut will be around the circumference of the body, behind the rib cage.

1. With the blade pointing away from you, locate where the last rib meets the spine. Use your knife to make an incision across the spine.
2. Continue cutting all the way around the abdomen. Make sure the cut is straight and meets the first incision you made at the spine.

Leave more skin than you actually need. This will allow for repair work to the cape from bullet holes, scars and drag marks – the taxidermist will trim any excess skin.

Note: If you would like your mount as pedestal or wall pedestal, begin the abdominal cut from in front of the hind legs.

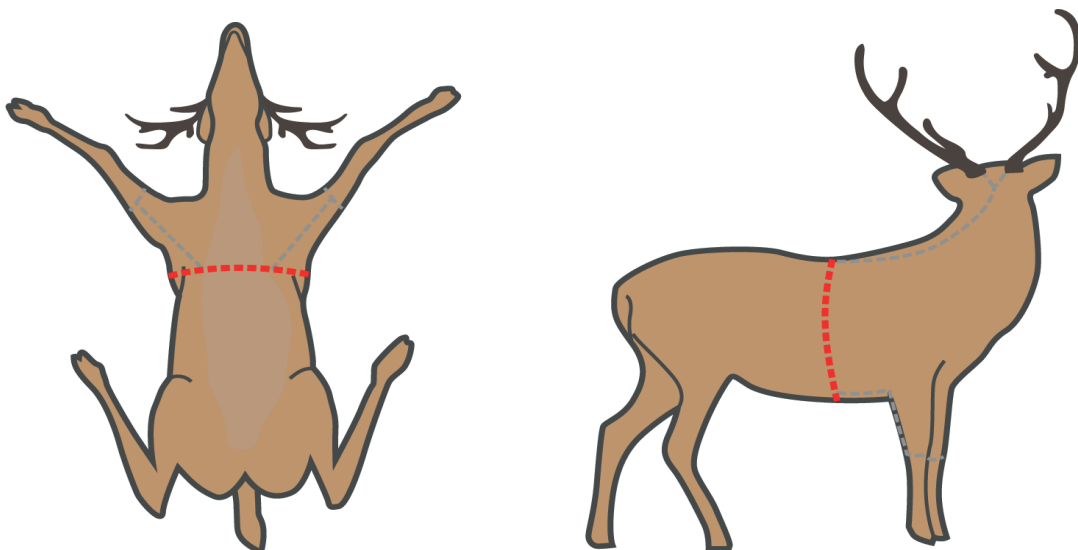


Figure 14: Abdominal cuts

Cut 2: Y dorsal cut

1. Begin the dorsal cut by locating the neck junction (known as the atlas joint), which is about 100 mm from the base of the antlers or horns. This is where the head meets the first vertebrae of the neck and the joint allows for movement of the head.
2. With the knife blade facing away from you, make an incision from the atlas joint down the spine, ending at the abdominal cut.
3. Make a Y incision from the dorsal cut to the base of each antler or horn.



Figure 15: Y dorsal cut

Cut three: Front leg cuts

The final cut runs from the back of the front legs, along each side of the sternum, ending at the first abdominal cut.

1. Locate the knee joint in the first front leg by bending the leg.
2. Place your knife under the hair, then make a cut around the circumference of the knee.
3. Locate the hairline on the back of the leg and use this as a guide to cut upwards.
4. Continue the cut through the armpit and under the chest until you reach the abdominal cut.
5. Repeat Steps 1 to 4 for the other leg.



Figure 16: Place your knife under the hair to avoid dulling the blade

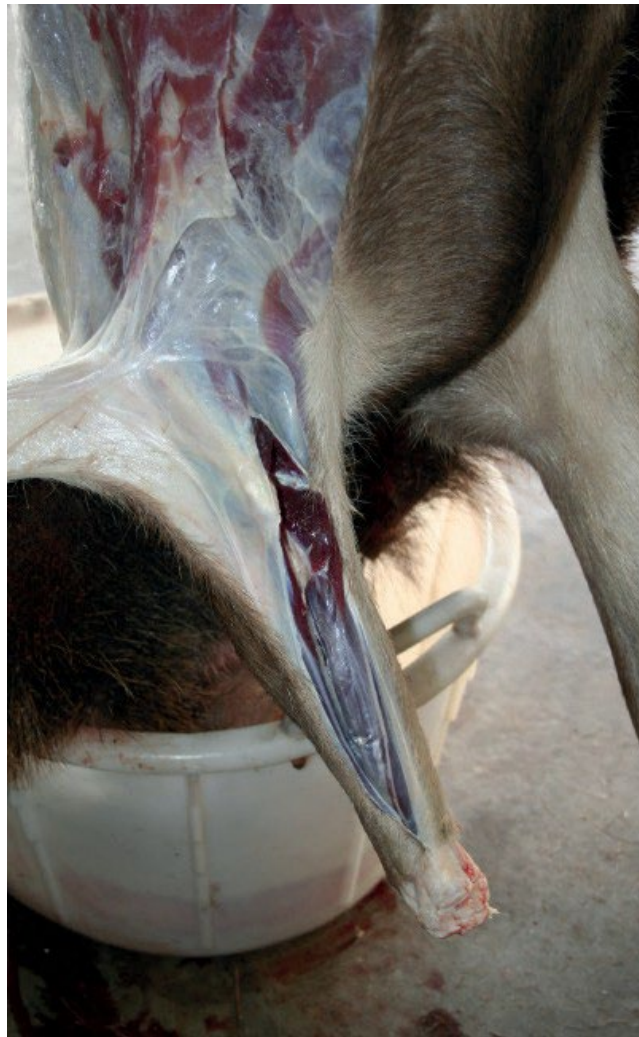


Figure 17: Front leg cuts

Removing the skin

Once you have completed all the cuts, you need to remove the skin from the carcass, being careful not to cut any holes in the skin.

1. From the abdominal cut made at the spine junction (cut 1), gently pull the skin away, using your knife to separate the skin from the muscle tissue.
2. As you pull the skin away from the carcass, gently coax the blade between the skin and the meat. You want the skin to come away clean, without any meat or fat attached.
3. Continue pulling the skin until you have skinned the body to the armpits.
4. To skin the legs, start at the knee cuts and continue skinning until you meet the armpits.
5. Once you have peeled the skin away, fold it over the back of the carcass to prevent soil and debris from sticking to the skin.
6. Make a tight fist and 'punch' the skin away from the meat by pushing your hand into the area between the meat and the skin until it comes apart.
7. Continue punching until you have removed most of the skin from the shoulders and neck.

Alternative method for Steps 6 and 7: Instead of punching the skin away from the carcass, you can continue to use your knife to remove the skin, although this method has a greater risk of cutting holes in the cape.



Figure 18: Removing the skin with a knife



Figure 19: The punching technique

Severing the head

Once you have removed the skin from the neck, you will need to sever the head from the body.

1. With a sharp knife, cut into the neck at the atlas joint.
2. Continue cutting through the muscle until you have reached the spine.
3. Complete the cut from the underside, starting behind the jawbone and continuing all the way around the neck.
4. Twist off the head at the atlas joint – the head should come away with the complete skin and head attached.
5. If you cannot remove the head easily, reassess the cut. Relocate the atlas joint and cut through the ligaments on either side that hold the joint together. Reattempt to twist the head away from the body.

You may now take the head and cape back to your camp or home to complete the face caping process.



Figure 20: Sever the head by cutting through the atlas joint

Caping the head

A taxidermist may charge a fee to cape the head.

If you cannot get the complete head to a taxidermist within a few hours of removing the skin and head, caping the head yourself is crucial to avoid hair slip or spoilage.

Step 1: Remove the skin from the antlers or horns

With the blade of your knife pointing upwards, cut from the Y incision at the rear of the antler. Extend the cut into the pedicle and up to the coronet.

1. Insert the flat-bladed screwdriver at a 45 degree angle into the cut.
2. Gently tap the handle of the screwdriver, prying the skin away from the coronet.
3. Repeat Steps 1 to 4 for the other antler or horn.
4. Never cut the skin away from the coronet as you risk cutting away skin and the fine hair covering the pedicle.



Figure 21: Y incision at the rear of the antler



Figure 22: Insert a flat-bladed screwdriver under the coronet at 45° angle



Figure 23: Using screwdriver to pry skin away from coronet

Step 2: Remove the ears

1. With your scalpel, begin removing the skin from the coronet back towards the ear for approximately 25 mm.
2. With your butcher's knife, cut the ear away from the skull, keeping the knife blade as close the skull as possible.
3. Pay close attention to the skin surrounding the ear and be careful not to cut through it.



Figure 24: Removing the ears

Step 3: Peel away the forehead

1. Using your scalpel, take the flap of skin from the Y incision and remove it from the skull.
2. Peel the skin forward towards the eyes, using the blade to coax the skin away from the skull.



Figure 25: Using blade to peel away the forehead

Step 4: Remove the eyelids

Once you have reached the ridge of the eyebrow, take extra care as you approach the eyelid, as this is the most difficult area of the face.

1. Insert your index finger into the eye socket and with your thumb, pull the forehead skin away from the skull.

2. As you pull the skin away from the eye socket, use your scalpel to cut away the internal membrane, ensuring it remains attached to the eyelid. The membrane extends from the eyelid into the eye socket and behind the eyeball.

To ensure that you do not cut through the skin, keep the blade of the knife as close to the skull as possible.



Figure 26: Insert your index finger under the eye socket



Figure 27: Remove the internal membrane from the eye socket using a scalpel

Step 5: Remove the pre-orbital gland (lachrymal gland)

All deer species have a gland located in front of the eye that secretes pheromones. This gland sits inside a pocket in the skull. You need to ensure the gland remains attached to your cape for proper mounting.

1. Using the tip of the scalpel blade, carefully extract the gland by gently coaxing the skin away from the bone. Be careful not to cut any holes in the gland. Alternatively, work the blade of your screwdriver into the pocket and gently pry out the gland.
2. Continue your cut along the ridge of the nose, working your way down to the back corner of the mouth.

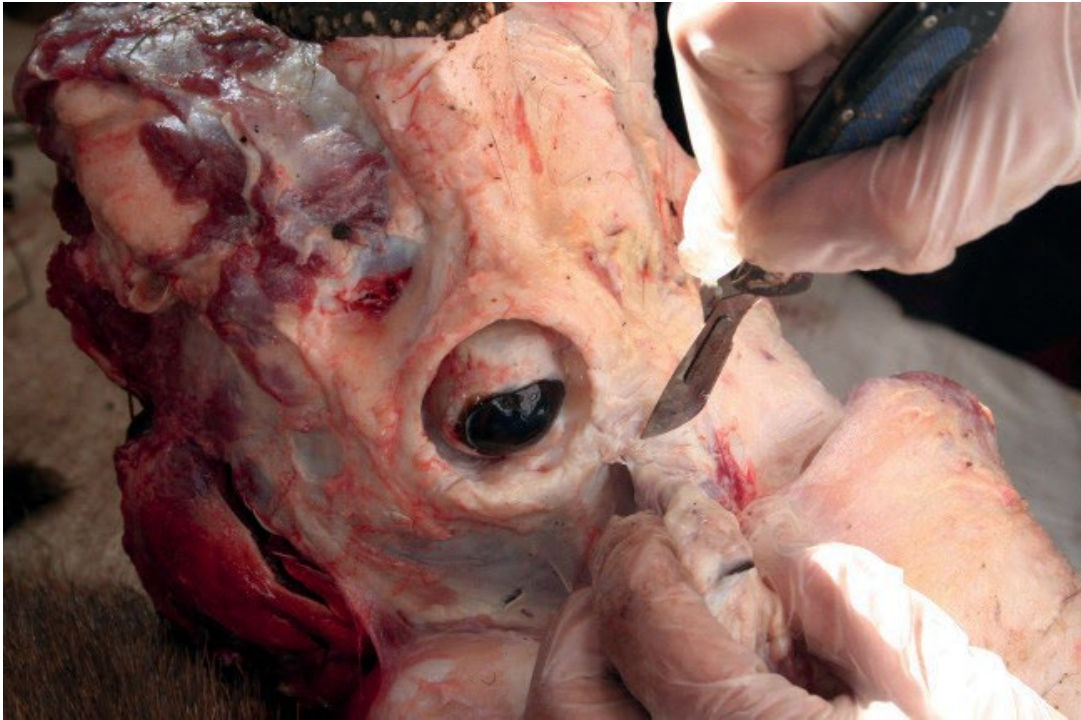


Figure 28: Removing the pre-orbital gland



Figure 29: Take care not to cut through the gland as you remove it from the skull

Step 6: Remove the mouth and lips

1. Open the mouth and peel the top lip up towards the nose. (Note that instead of teeth, many herbivores have a very hard top palate, which is used to grip and tear grasses as they feed.)

2. Make an incision as close to the top palate (and teeth) as possible then continue this cut around the gums to the rear of the mouth.
3. Using the scalpel, cut into the skin around the gums until you reach the jawbone.
4. Repeat Steps 1 to 3 for the bottom lip, cutting along the gum line as close to the teeth as possible.
5. Using the scalpel blade, remove the skin from under the jaw.



Figure 30: Making incision on inside of the top lip



Figure 31: Cutting along bottom gum line

Step 7: Remove the nose

1. Locate the septum by turning the top lip up towards the nose. You'll find a vertical cartilage that is attached to the skull.

2. Cut across the cartilage with the scalpel, as close the gum line and skull as possible.
3. Work the scalpel into the nose cavity, cutting through the septum. Continue to remove the inner skin from the lips and mouth.



Figure 32: Removing the nose

Step 8: Detaching the head skin

The head skin may still be attached to the skull near the back corners of the mouth where you will find an inner cheek with series of spikes called buccal papillae.

1. Pull the head skin over the face, towards the nose.
2. Locate the inner cheek and cut through the internal skin to expose the rear molars.
3. Using your scalpel, cut the cheek along the gum line until you reach the incisions made in the front of the mouth. Retain as much of the buccal papillae as possible

The head skin should now come away freely.



Figure 33: Detaching the head skin

Splitting the lips, nose and eyes

To preserve the cape properly you will need to split the lips, nose and eyes to allow salt and tanning solutions to penetrate the skin. This will prevent harmful bacteria from growing and will lock the hair follicles in place.

Step 1: Split the nose

1. Turn the nose pad inside out to expose the raw skin. Locate the septum that covers the nose pad and extends along each nostril.
2. Using your scalpel blade, cut through the centre of the septum down to the nose pad.

Do not cut through the nose pad. This will split the nostrils into two tubes.

3. Remove as much flesh and muscle tissue as possible, leaving a clean white surface. Retain at least 20 mm of inner nostril.



Figure 34: Cut through the centre of the septum



Figure 35: Once the septum has been cut, the nostrils will separate into two tubes

Step 2: Split the lips

After removing the lips and mouth from the skull, you should see an outer surface of the lip (hair side) and the textured inner surface of the mouth (cheeks and gums).

Retain this extra skin for the taxidermist.

Due to the thickness of the lips, you need to separate the outer skin from the inner cheek skin.

1. Beginning with the top lip, locate the initial cut along the gum line below the nose.
2. Using the scalpel, run the blade through the flesh, between the two surfaces of the skin. The flesh will become darker in colour and you will notice small hair follicles as you near the outer lip. Do not cut through the lip.
3. Continue to separate the two layers of skin including the lip, inner cheek and buccal papillae.
4. Repeat this Steps 1 to 3 for the bottom lip.



Figure 36: Separate the outer skin



Figure 37: Lips after separation from the inner skin

Step 3: Split the eyes

The thin tube of membrane that is attached to the eyelid can be very thin so take extra care when splitting it from the cape. The aim is not to remove it from the eyelid, but to separate the layer from the cape.

1. Gently swipe the blade between the cape and the tube of membrane.
2. Continue this process until you reach the eyelid. (The eyelid is an off-white line at the opening of the eye.)
3. The membrane will separate from the cape in the form of a translucent tube.



Figure 38: Membrane attached to the eyelid

Turning the ears

The ear has a stiff inner cartilage, which is covered by skin on both sides. The rear is covered by thick fur. The inner portion of the ear is relatively smooth and lightly covered in fur called guard hair.

Turning the ears is a critical step in preparing a cape. It involves separating the rear skin from the inner cartilage. This will turn the ear inside out, similar to the finger of a glove.

Step 1: Create a pocket

1. Using your scalpel, create a pocket by separating the skin from the back of the ear for about 40 to 50 mm.
2. Make sure you separate the skin from the ear butt and the apex of the ear. The apex is the “V” located at the front of the ear, which is the entrance to the ear canal.

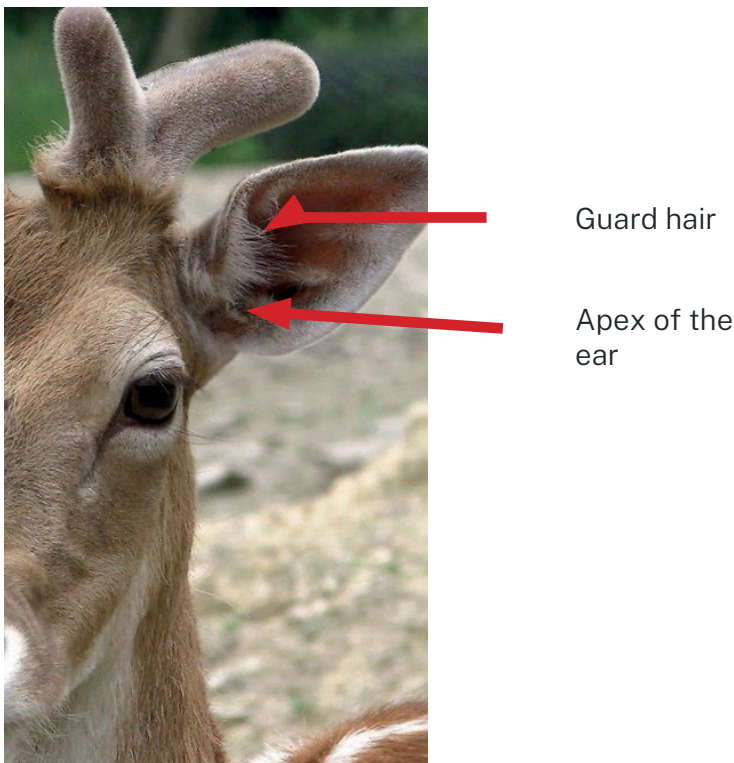


Figure 39: Diagram identifying the guard hair and apex of the ear



Figure 40: Create a pocket using a scalpel

Step 2: Separate the skin (splitting the ears)

3. Insert the ear pliers into the pocket you have just created.
4. Keeping the ear pliers flat against the ear cartilage, firmly squeeze the handle to separate the skin. You may need to turn the pliers to the vertical position to free the remaining skin.
5. Continue squeezing the handle until you have separated the skin from the cartilage, all the way to the tip and the outer edge of the ear.

You may need to use the scalpel to separate the ear edges.

6. Turn the ear inside out and gently swipe the blade along the white cartilage towards the seam.
7. Be extremely careful not to cut through the skin.
8. Remove as much flesh and muscle tissue from the ear butt and cartilage as possible.

9. Repeat the above process for the other ear.

Note: If you do not have ear pliers, insert a flat tool into the pocket you just created. Work the tool into the ear to separate the skin.



Figure 41: Ear pliers inserted into pocket created in the ear



Figure 42: Using a flat tool instead of pliers



Figure 43: Ear turned inside out

Salting the cape

Now that you have removed and split the cape, it is almost ready for salting. Salting the cape will remove any moisture and hinders the growth of harmful bacteria. It also helps prevent hair slip, which can ruin the cape, and preserves the cape until it is tanned.

You need to remove any excess muscle, sinew or fat from the cape so the salt can completely penetrate the skin, drawing out all the moisture. Note: it is recommended that you use natural cooking salt or flossy salt that is preservative and additive free.

Step 1: Remove excess fat, muscle or tissue

10. Using a filleting or skinning knife, pull away any muscle tissue from the skin and allow the blade to remove any excess flesh.
11. Repeat the fleshing technique until the skin is clean and white.
12. Dice stubborn muscle tissue by cutting straight lines through the meat at 1 cm intervals. Your knife must be very sharp. Repeat the cuts at a 90 degree angle, taking care not to cut through the skin.



Figure 44: Remove excess flesh with knife

Step 2: Salt the cape

13. Lay the cape flat on a bench.
14. Turn the face inside out so the flesh side faces up.
15. Cover the entire cape with a generous layer of salt, rubbing the salt into the split areas of the eyes, ears, nose and lips.

You may need to unroll the lips so they lie flat.



Figure 45: Salted cape

Step 3: Roll and hand the cape

16. Take the skin from the brisket (lower abdominal cut/armpit) and fold it into the shoulder area
17. From the nose, tightly roll the cape as you would a sleeping bag.
18. Place the cape in an old pillowcase or a hessian bag.
19. Hang the bag with the cape in cool place out of the sun and allow it to drain. Place a bucket under the bag to catch the fluid.

Note: If you are unable to salt the cape, you may place it in an airtight bag or container after rolling and then freeze it.



Figure 46: Rolled cape



Figure 47: Air-tight container



Figure 48: Cape in bag hanging from tree to drain

Step 4: Re-salt the cape

20. After 24 hours, unroll the cape and lay it flat on the bench, flesh side up. Scrape the original salt from the cape.
21. Re-salt the entire cape. This removes any remaining moisture from the skin.
22. Place the cape at a slight angle on the bench to allow any fluids to drain away for another 24 hours. Your cape should now be dry but pliable and easy to fold.
23. If the cape has not adequately dried after the second salting, repeat the process after another 24 hours.

Do not place the cape in the sun. This will stiffen the cape and it may lose any stretch that is required for the mounting process.

When adequately dried, shake off the excess salt and roll the cape (repeat step 3).



Figure 49: All the elements of a shoulder mount ready for the taxidermist.

Your cape is now ready to send to the taxidermist!

Complete your training

Congratulations! You've completed the online *Caping for a shoulder mount* short course.

We recommend you now contact a Hunter LEAP Trainer for a practical, hands-on demonstration of the caping process.

Contact your local club or email hunter.leap@dpird.nsw.gov.au for a list of Hunter LEAP Providers and Trainers in your area.