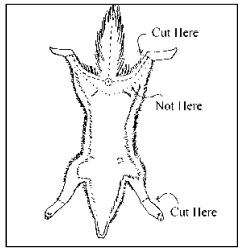
Preparing Skins for Use

Processing and preparation of skins vary between each species. Prompt and careful attention in the skinning, stretching and drying process produces better quality furs and brings a better price if selling the hides skinned open. (NPWRC)

Skinning

For most species there are three steps to bring fur from its raw form to a good quality pelt. These are skinning, stretching, and drying. To prevent hair loss, the animal is skinned soon after it is taken. First thing to do once the animal is trapped is to skin it. Most furbearing animals are cased skinned except beaver, which is skinned open.



The next thing is to remove all the fat, flesh and gristle from it. A metal scraper or "fleshing tool" (donish) is used to carefully remove as much of the fat as possible. Traditionally made of caribou bone, these scrapers can also be fashioned from wood. (NPWRC)

Preparation

After the skin is removed, it is stretched on a board to dry. Each species requires a slightly different shaped and sized board. For marten, mink, otter, wolverine, muskrat, wolf, and lynx, the stretching board starts with two almost parallel boards that get thinner until they touch at the point. Beaver stretching boards are round.

Drying takes from a single day to nearly a week, depending on the species and weathers conditions. The skin must be kept warm while it is drying. Make sure the pelt is not exposed to high heat or it could crack or tear.

After the pelts are removed from the stretchers, they are kept in a cool, dry place to reduce rotting or mildew that will ruin the pelt and reduce its worth. (NPWRC)

Credits

Telida Village has developed a series of subsistence brochures that will contribute towards keeping the tribal members healthy and the environment clean for future generations, fulfilling the Indian General Assistance Program's objective to reduce the risk to human health and the environment.

Funding

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Information Credits

Nelson, Richard K., et al; Tracks in the Wildland A Portrayal of Koyukon and Nunamiut Subsistence
Stokes, Jeff W 1985 Tech. Paper 86, Natural Resource Utilization of Four Upper Kuskokwim Communities Alaska Department of Fish and Game Tech Paper 86
Holen, David L,, William E Simone, and Elizabeth Williams 1985 Tech. Paper 296 Wild Resource Harvest and Uses by Residents of Lake Minchumina Alaska Department of Fish and Game Tech Paper 296
Northern Prairie Wildlife Research Center

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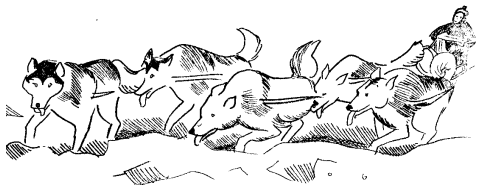


Trapping in the Upper Kuskokwim

Photo Courtesy of U.S. Fish and Wildlife DSL Image Library

If the beaver built a small house and stored little food, a short winter was expected. If he built an extra big house, a long winter was coming. -Nikolai Belief System

Information Brochure Funded by the Environmental Protection Agency

Trapping on the Kuskokwim

We have been trapping furbearing animals long before the arrival of the first Russians into the Upper Kuskokwim region. We used skins for warmth and clothing and ate the meat of muskrat, lynx, and beaver.
(Stokes 1985:172-206)

Subsistence

Beaver was very important in the diet. According to older Nikolai residents, our earlier ancestors in this area

trapped beaver pretty much all year round. The most common method for harvesting beaver at that time was to open the beaver house or dam and kill the beaver with spears, arrows, or clubs.
The other land-dwelling furbearers such as lynx, fox, wolverine, and wolf were trapped with deadfalls, snared with caribou hide nooses, shot with arrows or pierced by spears. We only took these animals to fill our clothing needs. (Stokes: 86: 173)

Trapping Seasons

We usually trapped all the furbearing animals species from the late fall through mid-winter, all except beavers and muskrats. From late winter through the early summer we trapped beaver and muskrat. November is called Minich'i'unadla'e, or trapping month, in our language.
(Holen, Simone, and Williams: 296:76)

Until the late 1960s, most of us trapped during the winter. Most households kept up many trapping areas, trapping different animals in each, and families combined trapping lines that were sometimes as long as 100 miles.

Nowadays we set up canvas wall tents and use the cabins that are still standing. During the first trip of the season, we set up the temporary camps and leave them in place until the last run of the season. (Stokes: 86:175)

The Mammals We Trap

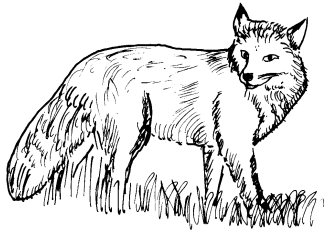
The furbearing mammals we have traditionally trapped are beaver, fox, marten, lynx, mink, muskrat, otter, wolf, and wolverine, rabbit and squirrel.
(Stokes 1985:178)

Beaver

Beaver is our most important furbearing animal for food and clothing. They are taken as much for meat as for their hides. The beaver were second to importance only to the caribou for our ancestors.

Other Furbearers

Muskrat hide is used for making parkas, mitten lining, clothing trim, and in the old days it was used to make summer pants. Mink hide is used for making mittens, hats, clothing trim, and as summer pants in the old days. The meat is eaten. Rabbit and squirrel hide is used for blankets.



Red fox hides can be used for making parkas, clothing trim, hats and children's parka ruffs. The meat was eaten when there was not enough other food. Lynx hide is used for making men's parkas, mittens and caps, but not for women and children to wear. The meat is good to eat but not for women.

Weasel hide is used for clothing trim. The meat is not eaten. Marten hide is used for hats and clothing trim. The meat was eaten in the old days when there was not enough other food.

Wolf hide is used for making parkas, mittens, winter boots, and parka ruffs. Wolverine is used for men's parkas and boot trim, and for trimming and inner ruffs on men's and women's parkas. (Nelson 1982:352-54)

Trapping Methods

Deadfall devices (dichin-ał - literally "tree trap") were traditionally used by our ancestors for killing furbearer species.

The construction details of these sets can vary, the basic idea of how it works is simple. Depending on the species, bait was attached to a central support so that when moved it caused a large object such as a log to fall on the animal, often killing it instantly.
(Stokes 1984:179-182)

Snares

Our traditional snares were made of caribou babiche or hide. They were placed over the trails of furbearers in a way that is similar to today. The steel snares that we use for beaver trapping did not appear until the early 1940s.

Before the steel snares were invented, beaver were trapped using steel leg traps attached to poles through the ice. Many trappers say that steel leg traps placed under the ice did not work as good as the steel snares we use today. Because of that, we extended our beaver harvest efforts into early summer using rifles and traps that are set up along riverbank slides to get more beaver.
(Stokes 1984: 174-182)

Traps

Today we pretty much only use steel leg traps (ał), steel snares (gaguł), and sometimes conibear style traps. The three types of land sets we usually use are: the ground or "cubby" set, snare sets, and the pole or elevated set.

Ground sets are used for all species of land-based furbearers. Snares are primarily employed for wolves, wolverine, and at times, fox and lynx. Pole sets are used for marten. Steel snares and conibear traps are used for trapping beaver beneath the ice. (Stokes 1984: 174-182)