

# TREATMENT OF GAME TROPHIES IN THE FIELD

By PAUL ZIMMERMANN, *Sculptor—Taxidermist*

## A. GENERAL TECHNIQUE

### 1. MAMMALS

*Skinning:* This must be done immediately after the kill. (Skins to be made into rugs should be cut symmetrically, care being taken to divide the light-coloured areas into equal halves). First a lead is cut along the middle of the belly, from sternum to anus, then other leads are cut along the inner side of each leg, from the foot towards the bellyline. For carnivora, this lead starts at the centre of each pad.

*Salting:* The skin must be salted on the spot and without delay. The amount of salt required varies with the size of the skin, e.g. a large lion skin requires about 10 lb. of dairy salt. Very coarse salt is useless as it does not draw moisture quickly enough. It should be crushed with a suitable implement, e.g. a heavy bottle or stone.

The salt is rubbed thoroughly into the fleshy side of the skin. If the flesh cannot be removed completely in the first instance the skin must be salted just the same and rolled up into a bundle, fleshy salted sides together, and set aside until the job can be finished—not later than within the next 24 hours. It is most important that all fat be removed, because skin covered by fatty tissue will deteriorate in less than 24 hours, even though treated with salt. Contact of the rolled up skin with a cement floor must be prevented by placing it on boards or something similar.

*Drying:* After the skin has been set aside for about 24 hours it is spread out in the shade, either on the ground or over a line, pole or branch placed horizontally, *salted side up*. A number of short sticks should be placed transversely between the folds to prevent the hairy sides from touching as they would if hung over a line. When the salted skin is spread on the ground it is not necessary to peg it down while it is drying. As soon as the skin is nearly dry, it is folded with *hairy surfaces* together to the required size and again exposed to the air for final drying.

*Special note for zebra skins:* Zebra skins, like the skins of giraffe or carnivora, are most perishable. The slightest delay in skinning and salting becomes a hazard. Decomposition may set in immediately and cause subsequent 'slipping of hair'. For this reason the above instructions should be followed implicitly.

*Preservation of the mane:* The fatty tissue covering the root of the mane must be carefully removed before salting.

Once the skin is dried and set in the bundle it is important not to force it open. If, however, it is absolutely necessary to inspect the skin, the folds must be opened only very little as otherwise the epidermis will crack and damage the skin permanently.

### 2. REPTILES

*Pythons and other snakes* are skinned either by cutting open along the belly before removing the skin or by stripping the skin from the neck downward (and inside out) before cutting open along the bellyline. The skin is then salted well and after a few hours the muscles adhering to the bellyskin can be scraped off more easily.

*Crocodiles* can be skinned in two different ways. If the bellyskin is wanted, it is cut off between the first and second lateral ridges. For 'horn-back' skins, the skin is simply cut open along the bellyline.

*Monitor Lizards* may be opened either along the centre back or centre belly, depending upon preference for either light or dark pattern.

*Note:* All reptile skins must be well salted prior to tanning. Best results are obtained with skins received in the fresh salted state (see note below on dispatch of skins). A well salted skin rolled up in a gunny bag will be safe from deterioration for about six weeks, depending on climate and general conditions. After that time it should be delivered for tanning or be allowed to dry. It is well to remember that a reptile skin to be preserved should never be exposed to the sun, but should be dried in the shade.

## B. SPECIAL TECHNIQUES

### 1. HEAD MOUNTS

When skinning heads for head-shoulder mounts it is important to remember that the neckskin must be slit at the top or dorsal side and never at the throat. The lead to be cut starts close behind the horns or ears and continues towards the middle of the shoulders. From there the lead proceeds towards each elbow ending about three inches below, at which point another cut is made around the leg. The skin is cut off across the chest at a distance of about six inches or more below the start of the brisket or sternum.

The following hints are well worth noting, for if they should be neglected the unsightly 'slipping of hair' is a foregone conclusion. A dressed skin with slipped hair is quite useless for mounting.

*Skinning of facemask and ears:* After the headskin has been removed from the skull, the fleshy lipskin is carefully skinned from the hairy outer skin without cutting through the edge. The layer of flesh at the root of whiskers (carnivora) must not be removed in the process, but a series of superficial cross-cuts made carefully between the roots so as to permit the salt to penetrate the epidermis from below.

*The nose cartilage* must remain attached to the bare end of the nose, but must be separated carefully from the hairy skin which itself must not be cut away.

The mucous lining of the *eyelid* must be separated from the outer skin by a careful slit from the inside, without cutting through the edge.

The *ears* have to be skinned by starting at the base and dissecting the outer skin from the ear cartilage up to a distance of  $\frac{1}{8}$  inch from the edge. If this is done correctly, the ear will look like a pocket turned inside out.

### 2. SKULLS

The skulls of carnivora (lion, leopard, etc.) wanted for mounting with teeth exposed, 'snarling', must not be boiled, as this treatment invariably causes the canines to crack or split during the subsequent life of the trophy. It is quite sufficient to remove the brain and flesh as far as possible and to apply salt thoroughly to all surfaces exposed before setting out to dry in the shade.

This precaution applies also to all skulls wanted for bleaching. Boiling will cause the bones to become permanently stained. Sometimes such stains may be removed but only at great expense of time, effort and money.

### 3. FEET

After the leg bone has been removed the toe bone must be dissected up to the end phalange which supports the nails or hoof. Every scrap of fat, flesh and gristle must be cut away so that the salt may penetrate the skin from underneath. Rub the salt well into the skin, well down into the nails (or hoof), then press the skin towards the sole and place the foot in the shade for drying.

In no circumstances should the legskin be slit at the back so as to facilitate the removal of the bone when the foot is to be used for mounting. The job of dissecting away the bone while the skin is gradually pulled down is time-consuming and also difficult. It is worth the trouble, as the seam on the finished mount always remains visible and unsightly. This hint applies particularly to elephant, rhino, buffalo and zebra feet or feet with short hair or no hair at all.

*Carnivora:* For skinning paws of carnivora, slit each toe underneath and rub the salt into the fleshy parts so that the claws may be preserved in situ.

*Caution:* It is not absolutely necessary to skin facemasks or feet by lamplight when the animal was shot just before sunset. The job may safely be postponed till the next morning, provided the unskinned parts are well covered with a cloth soaked in 95 per cent alcohol or methylated spirits.

The common practice of filling the footskin of elephant, or any other animal, with wood ash should be avoided. The ash merely prevents the evaporation of moisture, thus encouraging putrefaction and producing feet that are useless for mounting.

### C. GENERAL INFORMATION

*Storage:* If salted trophies must be stored for some time, it is advisable to apply an insecticide for greater safety. Naphthalene, DDT or Gammexane in powder form are useful. If sprays are found to be more convenient, only water solutions should be used, as solvents ordinarily used in insecticidal sprays may prove harmful to the skins.

*Dispatch of skins:* All animal skins, except reptile skins, can be dispatched for processing after they have been salted and dried as indicated above. Crocodile skins, however, should be dispatched in a fairly fresh state, salted but not dried, packed in a gunny bag marked 'perishable goods' for speedier delivery.