

Skinning a Squirrel for Taxidermy



by UndeadArts

There are lots of tutorials available for skinning squirrels for the purpose of cooking (because they sure taste good!) but these little guys also can make unique looking taxidermy mounts, so this Instructable will show you how to skin a squirrel for just that purpose!

You could still eat the meat, too, but just keep in mind it takes a bit longer to skin this way so make sure you work in a cool, clean environment if you want to keep the meat in good condition. (The squirrel used in this tutorial was a road kill and the innards had ruptured and tainted part of the meat so I didn't eat this one) but for a taxidermy mount it will work perfectly since the pelt itself was in fine shape.

Here is what you'll need to get started:

- A *fresh* squirrel. (If road kill don't pick up one that smells bad, has bugs on it or is losing hair. Also check your local regulations, in some states its illegal to pick road kill so wait until squirrels come in season in your area!)
- Small but sharp knife
- Scissors



Step 1: Make the First Incision

The skinning method shown in this tutorial is known as *dorsal skinning*. This is a method commonly used by taxidermists since it only involves one single cut along the animal's spine and makes mounting relatively easy and sewing minimal. On squirrels, I start at just behind the shoulders and cut down to just before the hips. Once the incision is made, you can

begin working the inner membrane away from the skin with the tip of your knife or even just your fingers. It's easy to separate especially if the squirrel is still warm. The last photo shows the skin completely separated from the sides. Now the next step will be skinning the legs, which involves a bit more precision!



Step 2: Skin the Hind Legs and Feet

With the sides of the skin separated from the middle of the body, you can now begin working the hind legs out with your fingers. Start by pushing the "knee" upwards until you can see the joint, and carefully start working the skin downwards from it with your hands. It will peel off almost like a wet sock! But use caution,

Again, don't pull or cut with too much force or the foot skin will rip. So use patience and precision, working the skin downwards until you reach the toe bones.

take your time and don't pull too hard or damage will occur.

Once you reach the squirrel's ankle joint, use the tip of your knife to start separating the small tendons and ligaments that connect the foot bones to the skin.

After you get to the toes, use your scissors to clip the joints that connect them to the foot bones and the entire foot skin will be fully separated. You've done it! Now repeat the same process on the other hind foot!



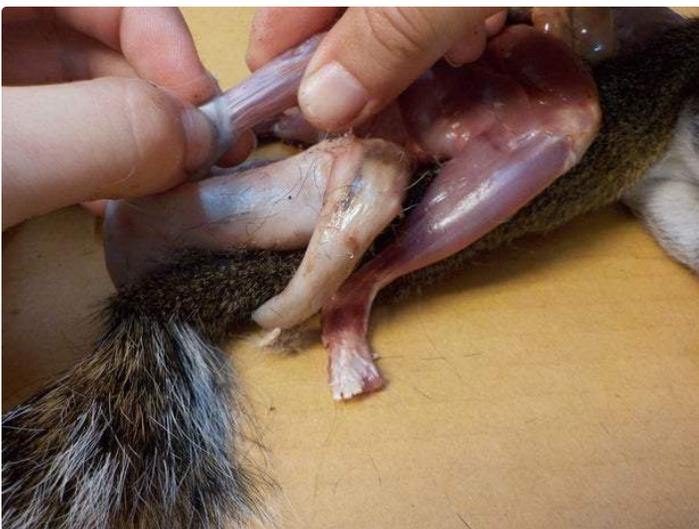


Step 3: Strip the Tail

Stripping the tail can be somewhat of a challenge and again requires careful handling. After both hind legs have been skinned out, start by grasping the base of the tail bone and the base of the tail skin with your fingers, and pull the *bone* straight outwards. (don't pull on the skin itself, this will tear it - simply hold it in place with your fingers while pulling the bone) If done correctly, the bone structure will pull right out in a single strand, and the resulting tail skin will be an empty tube.

And if the tail does rip in half by mistake, don't despair! You can still skin it out by splitting the skin underneath, peeling it off the bone and stitching it back onto the pelt afterwards.

After the tail has been skinned, you can now peel the entire hind end of the pelt forward toward the shoulders, to proceed with the final steps!





Step 4: Skin the Front Legs

The front legs are skinned similarly to the hind legs by working the skin off with your fingers, however instead of skinning the foot all the way down to the toes, I clip the foot bone off at the ankle joint. Squirrels have very little fat or muscle structure in their front paws and so I've been able to leave the bones in without worry about them going bad. They will shrink somewhat on the finished product, but for basic display mounts or props this is not a major issue. The squirrel in this tutorial will later be used as

part of a costume prop.

(However, if you want to make a very high-end mount for a taxidermy competition, museum display or other specialized showing, you'll want to take the extra time and precision to skin the front feet as entirely as the hind ones so that they can be filled with clay to prevent excess shrinkage.)



Step 5: Skinning the Head - Ears

After the front legs have been skinned out, pull the skin forward over the neck until it reaches the cartilage bases of the ears. These are visible as small, pale "lumps" on either side of the head when viewed from under the skin. Cut each one off close to the skull with your knife blade. Its better to cut as close to the bone as possible to avoid damaging the skin.

Once you cut the ear bases, you can now proceed to pull the skin further forward until you reach the back corners of the eyes. These are visible as darker, almost blue-ish sections in the skull and the next step will show you how to further proceed.



Step 6: Skinning the Head - Eyes and Mouth

With your blade, carefully cut the thin membrane that connects the corner of the eye skin to the skull, being careful to leave the actual eyelids intact on the hide. Repeat on both sides of the face and then work the skin down to the corners of the mouth. Again, cut the membrane that connects it to the bone and peel

everything down until you reach the nose. With your scissors, cut the nose cartilage from the skull and the skin will be entirely separated from the rest of the carcass!





Step 7: You're Finished!

The completed skin will be entirely intact from head to tail, with all feet, toes, claws, whiskers, nose and eyelids attached. The skin can now be prepared for tanning or placed in the freezer until you can proceed with further work on it. To freeze your skin, turn it fur-side out to help prevent freezerburn, fold it into a Ziploc bag and place in the freezer until you can later finish it up. Don't thaw it until you are entirely ready to work on it again!

As far as further preservation, you can buy home-tanning solutions from most taxidermy supply companies, or salt-dry the skin and send it to a professional tannery. Either way will fully preserve your pelt so you can make it into your very own little roadkill trophy!





An excellent tutorial, Ellie. (I voted).