

# Mount Preparation

**It never fails that each year I see several beautiful trophy animals ruined due to improper handling in the field. With a little knowledge, many of these mistakes could be prevented. The purpose of this section is to help you get your trophy animal to your taxidermist in the best possible condition. Proper field care, and knowing what NOT to do, is a big part of making your mount look the best it can.**

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## Things to remember when taking the shot

- Remember that a truly dead big game animal will die with their eyes open! An elk or deer with closed eyes is probably still alive... Make sure your animal is dead before you start attempting to field dress it.
- A head or neck shot will seriously damage the cape and could make the taxidermist's ability to mount the trophy impossible.
- Do not slit the throat of your trophy animal if it is already dead. "Bleeding out" the animal is unnecessary. Blood no longer pumps through the heart of a dead animal. With the heart not pumping blood, the blood will stay in the areas of the body and cannot move. Slitting the throat will also ruin the cape.
- After you've killed your trophy, take as many pictures of the trophy from as many views as you can before you start cleaning the animal. Take as many measurements as possible such as distance from nose to antler, circumferences,

everything. Place an item of known size in all pictures (or a use a small ruler if you have one). The pictures will help your taxidermist get the best likeness of your animal.

- If you shoot a bird that you will want to get mounted, don't ring the neck. Ringing the neck will ruin the feathers around the neck and make for a horrible mount. You can quickly dispatch a wounded bird by compressing the chest cavity which will quickly suffocate the bird.
- Do not drag your big game animal with ropes tied to it if you want to preserve the cape. Ropes will easily destroy the fragile hairs and dragging it will pull hair out.
- If you must drag the animal, use a tarp or an old blanket. Put the animal on top of it and drag it by the tarp paying attention to whether or not the tarp is wearing through.

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## FISH - SKIN MOUNTS

1. Carefully examine the fish for damage and determine the best or "show" side.
2. Take a good color photo. Avoid bright sun and flash photos (too much glare).
3. Keep the fish alive or get it cold. If putting the fish in a cooler, keep the "show" side up **AND PUT NOTHING ON TOP OF THE FISH**. This is very important to keep the fish from getting blotchy. No ice, no cans, no other fish - **NOTHING** on top of the fish!
4. If you cannot bring the fish in to the taxidermist right away, then you must freeze the fish.
5. Wrap the fish in clean, wet rags or paper towels, then place in a plastic bag (garbage bags work.) Take care to keep the fish as flat as possible, and place it in a freezer.

**NEVER, EVER.....**

1. Gut the fish. While this damage can usually be repaired, it will cost extra
2. Wrap the fish in newspaper. News print can be absorbed by the fish skin and may be hard to cover. Newspaper also dries out the skin leaving the fins very fragile.

**If you are in a back country situation where freezing may not be possible, or a fisherman who practices catch & release, you may want to have a reproduction of your fish done, instead of a skin mount.**

## FISH – REPRODUCTIONS

1. Measure the length from the nose to tip of the tail. Be sure to fan or spread the tail when measuring.
2. Measure the girth (circumference) of the fish around the belly. (Roughly 2” behind the front fin.)
3. Weigh the fish, if possible.
4. Note the sex of the fish (when possible) and whether or not it is spawning. This is most important for members of the trout & salmon family to ensure the fish is painted to the proper color and has the appropriate shape.
5. Take several good quality color photos of the fish. Color photos are best, NO flash photos and avoid bright sunlight (too much glare).
6. Release the fish (or fillet it).

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## BIRDS

Birds are very easy to care for in the field. First, you must determine if the bird is good enough to mount. Many birds brought in each year, particularly waterfowl, are not fully feathered enough to make a good mount. Check for pin feathers by gently lifting backwards and looking for feathers that are not fully grown. The back of the neck, the top of the head, the rump and the side feathers are the areas where pin or blood feathers are the most common. Also look at the size of the bird compared to other birds of the same species. Older, more mature birds are generally larger. Check to see how badly hit your bird was. If it has large holes, wing feathers shot or broken

off or more than just a few pellets in the head area, it is probably in too poor of a condition to mount. If you are in doubt, bring the bird in to your taxidermist so that he/she can check it for themselves.

Assuming that you have a well feathered bird that you did not shoot up,

1. Rinse or wipe as much blood off the feathers as you can.
2. Place a piece of toilet paper, or other absorbent material, in the birds mouth to help absorb fluids.
3. Tuck the head under or next to the wing and place the bird head first in a plastic bag.
4. Keep the bird as cool as you can and bring in as soon as possible OR place in a freezer.
5. Turkeys and other large birds may need to be field dressed in order to keep them from spoiling.
  - A) Make a short incision from the vent to the base of the rib cage.
  - B) Remove the entrails and rinse the cavity with water, then place ice inside the cavity.
  - C) Place in a cooler or take it to the taxidermist ASAP.

**TIPS: Handle the bird carefully and try and avoid anything that might stain or break the feathers.**

Birds may also be frozen and shipped via UPS if you live a distance away. Please call (814) 418-9937 before shipping for complete instructions on packing and the proper paper work to enclose.

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# MAMMALS

There are several different ways you may choose to mount a mammal and each way requires slightly different handling in the field. You may choose to do a full body mount. This is most common for smaller mammals (like mink and squirrels) and medium mammals (like foxes & raccoons). Bear, deer and other big game animals can also be mounted as full body mounts, but because of the size, they require different field care than small & medium mammals.

Bears more commonly are made into a rug, but bobcats, coyotes and foxes also make a beautiful rug. Field care is very similar for any animal you want to make into a rug. Half or 3/4 body mounts are also very popular for bear, but can be done for other animals as well.

Gameheads or full shoulder mounts are the most popular way to display many trophy animals. Deer and other horned and antlered are most often mounted this way.

## BASIC RULES FOR FIELD CARE OF ALL MAMMALS

1. Whenever possible, bring it in fresh for the taxidermist to skin.
2. **NEVER** SLIT THE THROAT OF ANY ANIMAL!
3. When field dressing any animal, always make your cuts with the sharp edge of the knife **UP**.
4. When field dressing **ANY** animal that you want to have as a **FULL BODY MOUNT**. **DO NOT CUT OFF THE GENITALS AND VENT.**
5. If you must skin the animal yourself, make as few cuts as possible.
6. Do not drag the animal unless you place something under it to protect the hide.
7. **NEVER** hang or drag any animal by the neck! This damages the hide and stretches the neck.
8. Place tags carefully in the hide, doing as little damage as possible. If possible attach tags to antlers to prevent ear incisions.

9. Keep every animal as COLD as possible and bring to a taxidermist as soon as possible
10. DO NOT SALT any animal unless it's head and feet are completely skinned and fleshed.

[Freeze](#) or keep cold any hide that is not fully prepared.

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## SMALL or MEDIUM MAMMALS

No matter how you plan to mount your **SMALL** or **MEDIUM** mammal, up to the size of a coyote, the field care we recommend is the same.

1. Check for damage. Head damage is particularly difficult to repair along with very large holes.

If you feel the animal is mountable, then.....

2. Place in a plastic bag. Most small & med. mammals carry fleas, lice or ticks. If you have some bug killer, like RAID, spray the animal down before putting it in the bag.
3. Bring the animal in fresh or [place in your freezer](#). DO NOT GUT or SKIN unless the weather is very warm and you have no access to ice. This is especially true if you want a full body mount. Many measurements are needed from the carcass.
4. If you must field dress the animal, then make a cut from the vent up the center of the belly to the ribs. Do not cut past the rib cage. Remove the entrails. Do not remove the genitalia or vent.
5. Fill the cavity with ice and bring in as soon as possible.

If you bring in your small mammal whole, a taxidermist can look it over and help you choose the best way to mount your mammal. Full body mounts and rugs are the most common choices, but there are some other interesting options as well.

Mammals can also be shipped via UPS if they are frozen first. Call (814) 418-9937 before shipping to be sure of proper paperwork and packaging.

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## LARGE MAMMALS

Due to their size, most large game animals require field dressing and skinning to make them easier to transport and to prevent the meat from spoiling. Follow the [Basic Rules](#) above when field dressing.

Before skinning the animal, determine what type of mount you want to have done - rug, full or 1/2 body mount or shoulder mount.

**TIP:** Take your time, keep your knife sharp and use a tape measurer.

### RUGS

Skinning an animal for a rug is the simplest method of all. Take a look at the diagram.

1. Make the usual cut down the center of the belly to the vent and field dress the animal.
2. When you are ready to remove the skin, lay the animal on its back. Continue the cut you made when field dressing up the center of the chest, stopping at the base of the skull. (Adam's apple)
3. Starting from behind the front pad, make a cut down the inside of the front leg across the chest down the opposite leg to the base of other front pad. *See fig. 1*
4. Make a similar cut from just *inside* the heel of the rear pad, across the inside of the rear leg, across the belly. Continue up the inside of the other, ending at the heel of the other foot.

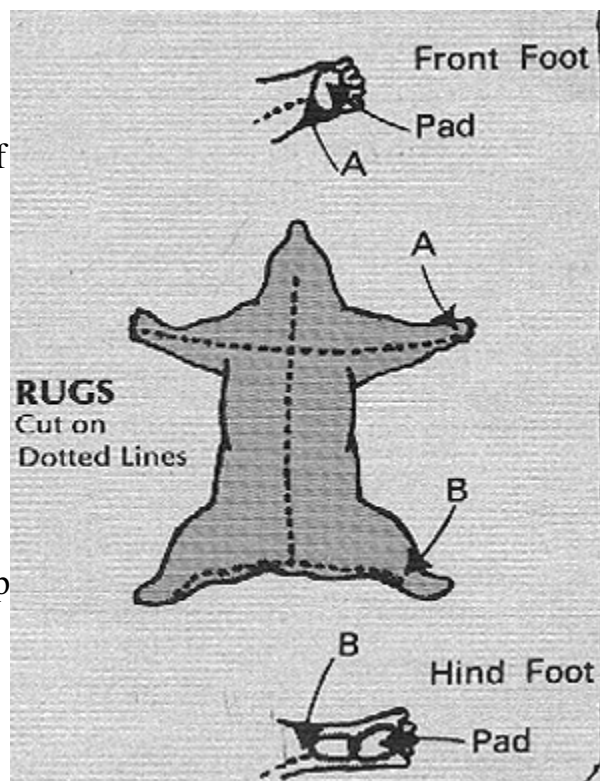


FIG 1.

5. Begin skinning, taking care not to cut any holes. Lift and pull the hide away from the meat as you skin.
  6. Cut thru the wrist and ankle joints by cutting the tendons. Leave the feet attached to the hide.
  7. If it is possible to hang the animal by the rear hocks, this will make skinning the rest of the animal easier. If not, roll the animal on its side as you skin. Then lay and roll it onto the other side to complete the job.
  8. When you reach the skull, carefully cut thru the meat until you reach the backbone and separate the skull from the neck. Or use a bone saw and cut thru the spine.
  9. We do not recommend that you skin out the feet or the head. **DO NOT SALT THE HIDE.** Salt only works if the head and feet are skinned and all the fat is removed from the hide.
  10. If you have a freezer or access to one, fold the hide up, place in a heavy plastic bag, and freeze.
- Click [here](#) for freezing instructions
11. If you have no freezer and the daytime temperature is above 50 degrees, keep the hide as cool as possible and take it ASAP to a taxidermist for processing.

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## GAMEHEADS

Full shoulder mounts, are the most popular way for most people to display their trophy animal.

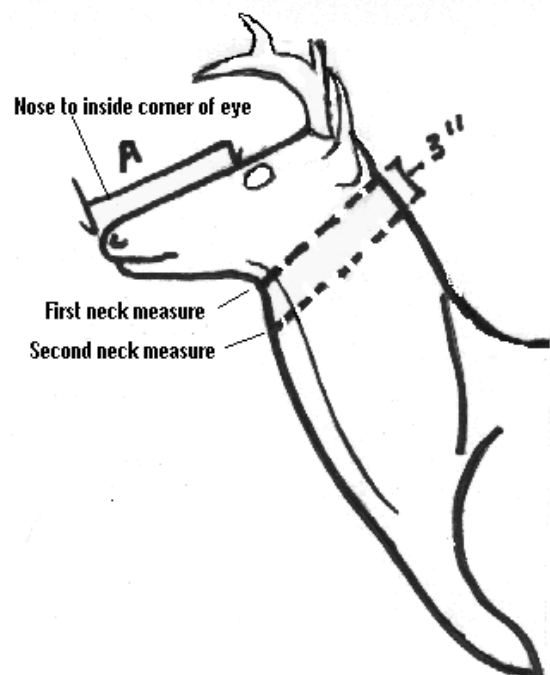
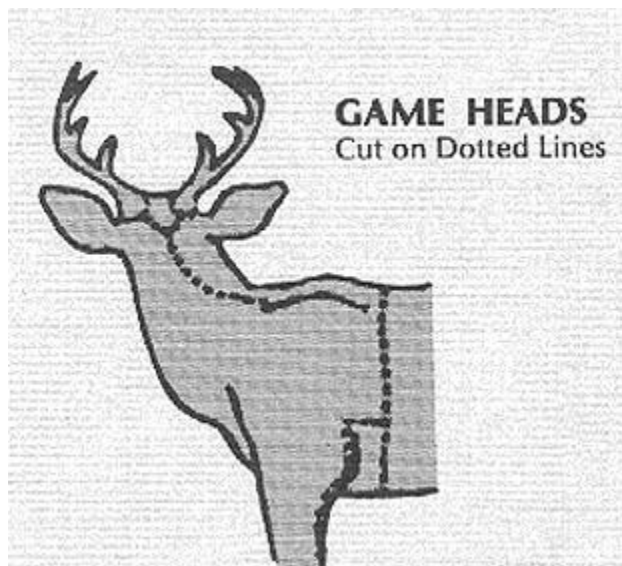
For local customers, once the animal is field dressed and properly registered, I encourage you to bring in the WHOLE animal fresh. I will gladly remove the cape at no extra charge. I do this for a couple reasons. First, when you see where to make the cuts and measure the neck, you will do a better job if you ever have to cape another animal yourself. Second, by capping the animal ourselves we know the cape is not going to be cut short and have extra holes that are often cut in the hide by inexperienced skinning. Third, I can get **several** fresh & accurate neck



measurements which helps me get the proper size form for your animal. And since I take a limited number of gameheads each year, if you wait to bring in your deer, I may be booked up already.

However, the following diagram and instructions should help you if you are in a situation where you have to skin the animal yourself. If the animal is too large to hang by the hind legs (elk, moose), then make the cuts on one side of the body and skin it as far as you can. Then lay the hide back over the meat, and roll the animal over. Make the remaining cuts and finishing skinning to the back of the skull.

1. Make a cut around the body **BEHIND** the front legs.
2. Make a cut up the back of the neck from the base of the skull to the first cut behind the shoulder
3. Make a cut up the back of the front leg to the point where the leg meets the body. Then bring the cut over to meet the first cut. **DO NOT CUT INSIDE THE FRONT LEG.**
4. Cut around the front legs, just above the knee.
5. Lift and pull the hide toward the head as you begin skinning. Be careful in the "armpit" area not to cut any holes.
6. Continue skinning until you are at the back of the skull, then stop.
7. Using a cloth tape measure, (or a boot lace if you forgot the tape measurer.) Measure around the neck just behind the ears and under the jaw. Measure on the meat, not on the hide.



8. Make a second measurement 3" down the neck, on the meat, parallel to the first measurement
9. Separate the skull from the neck, fold the hide flesh side to flesh side and place in a plastic bag to keep from drying out. **DO NOT SALT THE SKIN !! Salt should be used only after the cape is fully processed or it will prevent the hide from freezing properly and create excess fluid which can cause the hide to spoil faster.**
10. If you are still unsure about where to measure, leave at least 6" of neck attached to the skull and bring it in. The head and cape may be frozen now and brought in later. Keep in a cool, dark place like an unheated garage or a spare refrigerator. You must bring the head into a taxidermist immediately if the temperature is above 40 degrees and within 2 days. If the temperature is above 45 degrees you need to freeze it or the hair will begin to "slip" if it is not frozen or processed soon after skinning.

Follow the [instructions for freezing mammals](#).

*The following instructions are to be followed **only** if you are in a back country situation or a drop camp, where the weather is warm and you do not have access to refrigeration.*

11. Measure from the nose to the inside corner of the eye only if you must remove the entire cape from the skull. To do this, make a cut from the base of the skull to the base of each antler or horn. Carefully cut and pry the skin from around the antler, then cut thru the ear cartilage as close to the skull as you can. Continue skinning forward until you reach the back of the eye. Put your hand under the cape & stick your finger in the eye socket. Then lift the skin & eyelid away from the skull as you carefully cut thru on the flesh side. **DO NOT CUT OFF THE EYELIDS!** At the front of the eye, many animals have a deep gland. When you reach the front of the eye, cut towards the bone and continue pulling on the cape. The next area is the rear corner of the mouth. Cut through here and separate the skin from the bone where it meets the teeth. When you reach the nose cartilage, cut straight down. Cut along the bone until the hide is completely off the skull. Now freeze the skin or ice it down, unless you are very experienced in processing capes. **DO NOT SALT !!!** Salt will only work if the nose cartilage is split, the lip skin is split, the ears are turned and the entire hide is carefully fleshed.

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# FULL BODY MOUNTS - LARGE MAMMALS



If you want a full body mount on mammals such as deer, sheep, goats and bear you need to take extra care and attention in the field.

First, field dress the animal in the usual manner, EXCEPT - keep the cut as short as possible and do not remove the genitals or the vent opening. Make your initial cut to the side of the genitals and next to the vent. To prevent fluid from getting on the meat tie them off **under** the skin.

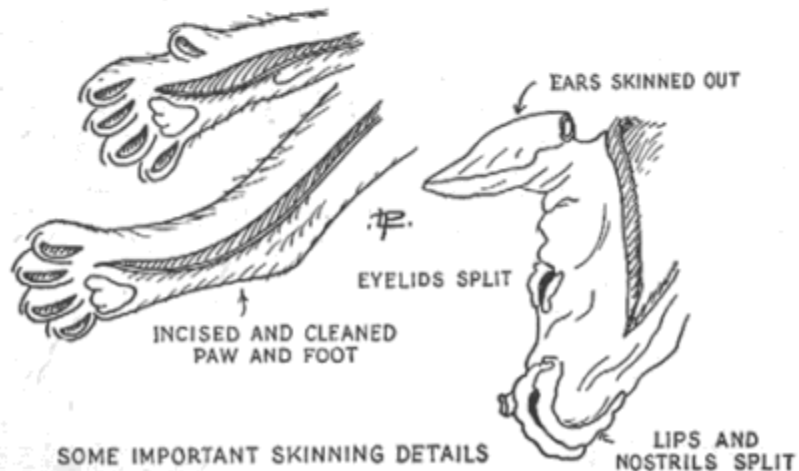
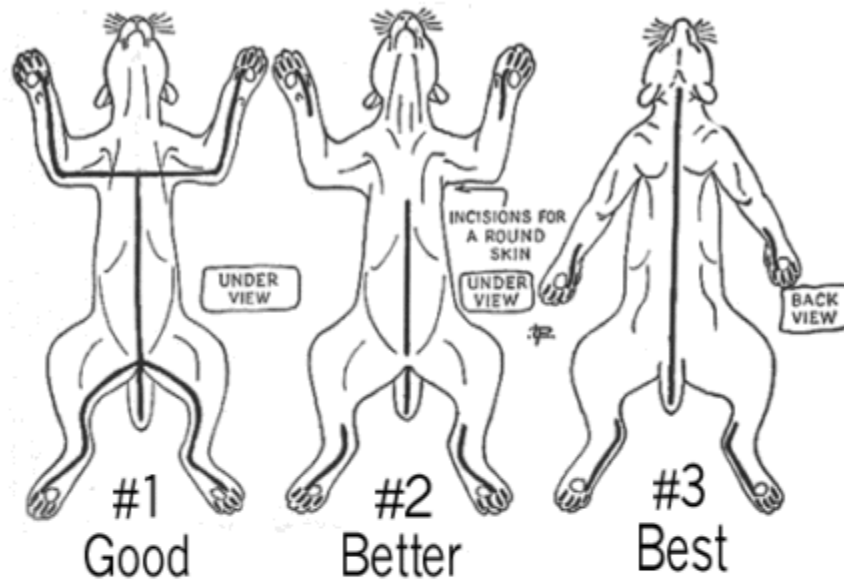
If you are familiar with a dorsal or back incision, this is the way we prefer to mount lifesize mammals. You may find it awkward and difficult to do in the field if you are not accustomed to skinning an animal this way. Below are drawings of the three most common ways of skinning an animal for a lifesize mount.

#1 is a modified version of the rug skinning method

#2 is the "short cut" method using shorter incisions on the legs. This method is preferred over splitting the legs completely.

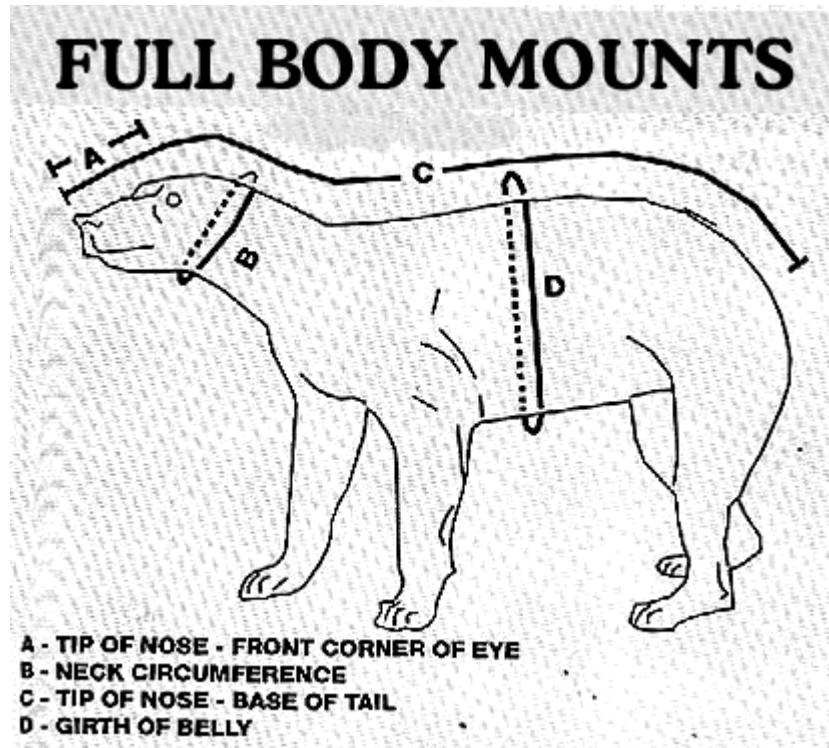
#3 is the dorsal or back incision. This method is the easiest to sew up and is the least likely to show any stitches

Drawings by Leon Pray from his book "Taxidermy"



If your trophy is an antlered animal, you will also need to make a short "Y" incision from each antler and slightly down the back of the neck. See [Gameheads](#) for more information.

Follow all other instructions when skinning. You will also need to take the following measurements



Measurements A & C are taken **BEFORE** skinning.  
Measurements B & D are taken over the **meat** after skinning.

*After skinning, the hide should kept on ice until processed by a professional taxidermist or frozen until you can get it to the taxidermist of your choice. Follow these instructions for freezing*

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## FREEZING MAMMALS

The most common problem with freezing mammals is the drying out of the ears, feet and face. This can make it more difficult to properly skin and prepare your mammal for mounting. For all mammals, wipe or rinse as much blood off the hide as possible, then do the following:

1. Wrap the face with a wet towel. Be sure to cover the nose and ears. Use more than one towel if needed. Place a heavy plastic bag over the towel, squeeze as much air out of the bag as you can and use tape to keep it in place.
2. For deer or other horned or antlered animals, wrap each ear with a separate wet towel and place a plastic bag over each ear. Then wrap the face from the bases and over the nose with another wet towel.
3. Wrap each foot and the tail (except the tail on bear) in a wet towel and place a plastic bag over each one.
4. If the animal is skinned, fold the skin flesh side to flesh side and fold or roll it up. Now place the entire animal or skin into a heavy plastic bag. We prefer Industrial Contractor Sacks - they are the most durable and the most difficult to puncture. If the animal has horns, allow them to stick out of the bag if possible.
5. Get as much air as possible out of the bag and tie or seal it shut. Seal the bag around the bases of antlers with tape. You need to keep as much air out of the bag as you can.

Now place the animal in a freezer near the bottom, if possible, so it freezes quickly. If you wrapped your animal like this, it will be in fine shape for several months and should cause no problems for any taxidermist you choose to bring it to.