

# Processing Animals for Consumption by Exotic Felines

By Lynn Culver

Wild felines kill and eat other animals. They have evolved to digest skin, fur, bones, muscle, and organs. There is some nutritional value in every part of an animal so when consumed in their entirety, prey animals form a balanced diet.

In captivity carnivorous species are often fed commercially processed meat, usually poultry, beef, or horse. In the case of beef or horse, it is muscle meat lacking the bones, skin, or organs and must be supplemented with vitamins and calcium.

At N.O.A.H. Feline Conservation Center we feed commercially prepared chicken leg quarters and we also butcher cow, horse, deer, beaver, squirrel, rabbit and chicken for our cougars and smaller cats.

Before accepting an animal for feeding, one must know when and why the animal perished to make a decision concerning wholesomeness and freshness. Freshness is a matter of temperature; during summer months animals spoil much quicker. Fresh-



ness can be determined by the presence of any off-smells, appearance of green in the belly area, or stomach bloat. Grain and grass in the stomach and intestines heat up

and compost creating gas that will back up into the bloodstream and spoil the meat.

If you have never butchered before, start small with a calf or deer and work up to the adult animals. Many times a developing bull calf is too large for the birth canal so it gets stuck and smothers and is delivered stillborn. It will be perfectly suitable for feeding. A deer hit by a car will die of shock, internal bleeding, or broken bones and be wholesome food as long as it is still fresh.

Always remove stomach and intestines, a source of *E. coli* bacteria and potentially parasites. The sooner it is removed, the better for the meat. For ease of processing, hang the animal. We have a chain hoist permanently mounted in a large oak tree. Commercial processors hang cows by a back leg, but we butcher an animal hanging from the neck and so I give guidance this way.

We do all our butchering using sharp knives. Keep a sharpener on hand and use it frequently during the process. We do not use chain saws or other mechanical means, just a knife and knowledge of anatomy.

First step is to eviscerate the animal. Slice up the center of the belly from groin to the rib cage and then slice perpendicular along the last rib bone to reveal the stomach and intestines. Next sever the liver from the diaphragm and also free the stomach and intestines to fall out of the hole you have made. Pull and cut the intestines free from

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the anus. Cut the liver free and retain it for food. Liver is an important nutritional package of iron and mix of B vitamins. The kidneys are usually embedded into the back and cushioned by a protective wad of fat. Cut them out for feeding as well.

I do not skin newborn calves or deer, but I do skin cows. I start at the stomach area using a knife to separate the skin from the stomach muscle, pulling the skin with one hand and swiping the knife along the meat with the other. I usually skin from just below the neck to the thigh in one piece, dealing with the neck area separately later.

For a young calf or deer, remove the legs whole, starting with the hind legs. The leg is connected to the hip by a ball and socket. Slice around the groin and rotate the leg to get a feel for where the ball and socket are

and aim your cut towards this area. There is a tendon that actually holds the ball in the socket and even though you cut around the socket, you have to maneuver your knife to reach this tendon attached to the top of the ball and sever it before the leg will be free.

The front legs are different. You have heard of a shoulder blade, that is a description of the bone. It is flat and blade-like and there is no ball and socket. So just cut under the armpit and pull the leg back to facilitate more cutting and you can cut all around the blade and remove it from the body.

A slice of the knife down both the right and left of the spine and then another several inches away to form a long trough will reveal the prime rib. This is very tender meat and a great treat. Inside the body cavity along the lower spine is another pocket of meat, the tenderloin and I cut that out as well. This leaves the body and the neck and head. Slice around the neck where it meets the body. Run your knife into the spine to sever the cord and separate the vertebrae with a knife. It takes some skill. If you do not succeed, you may then need to resort to an ax.

Sever the body into two pieces above the hip and pelvis area. Slice deeply with a knife from the backside and then from the inside. Apply pressure to crack the spine and help finish severing between the vertebrae joints with the knife.

Place the chest cavity on a level surface and slice through the diaphragm, which is a flap that separates the chest cavity from the stomach cavity. We remove the lungs and heart. The lungs do not really seem like food to me; they are like a sponge. We feed the heart, but discard the lungs along with the stomach and intestines.

This makes four legs, a neck with head, a pelvis and a chest cavity, and a bag of tenderloin, prime rib, liver, kidney, and heart. A large newborn calf feeds seven cougars one meal. When feeding young calves there will only be lower parts of the legs to dispose of, or pieces of the skull and lower jaw.

Larger animals are just like the calf, though with adult animals you spend considerable time cutting hunks of meat off the animal. We cut with a knife and use a hay hook to pull the meat way from the animal

as we are cutting. We have several large pans to hold the meat. Periodically we pause from butchering and bag the meat for freezing.

Not all animals are suitable as animal grade protein. Some are old and skinny and will be a big disappointment. The single best indicator of the meat to bone ratio will be the appearance of the back and spine. A good cow or horse has a flat back; you cannot see the spine. If there is a ridge or any sign of an indent along the spine, the animal is not optimum and the meat to bone ratio will be less than ideal. Keep that in mind because you want results for your work and a thin cow with little meat is still a lot of work and creates hundreds of pounds of gut contents, skin and bones to dispose of.

When offered an animal, ask the farmer questions. Buy a *Merck Veterinary Manual* and look up cattle illnesses and problems. Call your vet and consult with him. When in doubt, do not use it. A few safe causes for death that you can accept for feeding are lightning strikes, hip and leg injuries from







breeding or other reasons, calcium deficiencies (eclampsia) after birthing that leave the momma cow paralyzed, uterine prolapse, pinched nerves from delivery that render the cow unable to stand, grass tetany caused by eating too much fescue in the spring, acorn poisoning from eating acorns in the fall, or hardware ingestion, usually hay bale strings or plastic bags consumed by the cow that wad up in the stomach and prevent digestion. Most horses offered will

be a result of colic or foundering. Horses have less problems birthing, but gorging causes either an immediate death from colic or irreversible injury from foundering.

Life is harsh and sometimes the most merciful thing a rancher can do is humanely destroy his stock. The best place to shoot is the brain, and the best way to hit the brain is to visually draw an X from the eyes to the ears and aim for that spot. The brain cavity on a cow or horse is rather small,

and high up. Aiming head on is the best approach. Wait until the animal is settled and not moving and then take quick aim with a pistol or rifle up close. A .22 hollow point will work, but a larger caliber bullet is recommended. When aimed right, an adult animal will drop immediately. When there is no eye reflex upon touching the eyeball, you know you have hit the brain.

We let large animals hang and cool before processing. This firms up the muscle meat and helps it freeze faster when it is bagged because it is already cool. In the summer, if possible, we arrange with the farmer to destroy the animal later in the day so it is eviscerated just before sundown and hangs to cool overnight when there are no flies. We begin processing at daylight before the flies wake up. In the winter, time of day is not so critical. If it is quite cool, once the stomach and intestines are removed, an animal can hang for days; neither flies or spoilage is an issue.

We compost intestines and stomachs and burn the bones and skin. We live in the country and have plenty of firewood for fuel. The job is not finished until everything is disposed of. It usually takes several hours to process and clean up after a “free” cow. •

## Amnesty Day



Rear: Jenney Tinnell, Julie Reid, Scott Hardin.  
Front: Ken Holmes.

*By Julie Reid*

On November 22, 2008 at the Jacksonville Zoo in Jacksonville Florida, the FCF participated in Florida’s Fish and Wildlife amnesty day. Amnesty day was created as a one-day public event and has a twofold purpose. First and foremost people can surrender exotic pets that they can no longer care for, free of charge with no questions asked. A licensed veterinarian examines all surrendered pets and if they appear healthy, Fish & Wildlife will try to place them with willing, qualified adopters. Hopefully this will prevent people from simply letting non-native animals loose. The second purpose is to educate the public about native and non-native wildlife and the husbandry of such animals along with Florida’s rules and regulations. Several associations were represented including the Jacksonville Herpetological Society and wildflorida.com along with FCF. This event allowed the FCF to network with Fish & Wildlife and talk with them about our organization, hand out a few journals, and promote our organization and husbandry course to both officials and the public as a valuable resource to all. Amnesty day is held in several locations around Florida throughout the year and we have been invited to participate at the Miami event in March. Thanks to Jenny Tinnell and Fish & Wildlife for this wonderful opportunity! •