

# **WILDLIFE HEALTH FACT SHEET**

## **MEAT SPOILAGE AND PROPER FIELD DRESSING OF WILD GAME**

This fact sheet gives an overview of a condition known as *meat spoilage* or *bone-sour meat* and how to avoid it. This is one of the most common complaints of meat quality by hunters but it is easy to avoid.

The terms above refer to meat from harvested wild game that undergoes bacterial growth after death leading to unpleasant changes in colour, texture and smell that can put human health at risk. Hunting can occur during warmer weather which further predisposes to meat spoilage and more effort is needed to avoid meat wastage and reduce the potential risk to public health. Even under cold weather conditions, larger animals like bison, moose, and elk, can spoil within hours unless the animal is cooled by proper field dressing, including hide removal. Although most hunters are well aware of how to avoid meat spoilage, there are many new hunters in BC and some may not have this basic information.

Hunting is an important part of big game management in BC and reducing waste and maximizing the use of the harvested meat is key to keeping hunting and eating game meat safe. Proper field dressing techniques can almost completely prevent meat spoilage and are easy to do if a few simple rules and principles and some simple equipment are used.

### **Rules:**

1. Cool the animal immediately
2. Keep it clean
3. Keep it dry, well ventilated and cool!

### **Equipment needed:**

- Paper towels for drying
- Rubber/latex gloves for your protection
- Sharp knives for skinning, boning and basic hunting knives
- Saw/hatchet to split and quarter the animal.
- Cheese cloth type bags to cover the animal to keep flies off, for boned meat or quarters
- Ropes and pulleys for hanging the carcass and meat
- Cover cloth or natural material to exclude birds and small animals
- Bleach, disinfectant to wash up
- Coolers or ice containers

### **Basic Field Dressing Techniques:**

1. Recover your animal after shooting as quickly as possible.
2. Go ahead and take photographs but get to work on the animal quickly to ensure good meat quality.
3. Cool the carcass/meat as quickly as possible, heat supports the growth of bacteria that are responsible for meat spoilage or decomposition.
  - a. Cool means you need to reduce the temperature from 100 F down to 70 or 80 F as quickly as possible in the first hour and then continue the cooling process.
  - b. The first hour is critical because bacteria grow very well at 90-100 F.
  - c. Hang the carcass from a tree if you can to speed up the cooling process.
4. Wear disposable or clean gloves when field dressing.
5. Make sure the animal is bled out, cut the throat to ensure it is complete.
6. Make sure any tools, knives, axes or saws you use are clean. Rinse off your tools frequently in a bleach solution while you are gutting, skinning and cutting up your animal.
7. Remove the internal organs, they will hold heat for a long time if left inside. Remove the windpipe and esophagus, these parts are key sites for meat spoilage.
8. Ensure good ventilation to speed up heat loss. Prop open the body cavity with a small stick to allow air movement.
9. Use paper towels to wipe out the carcass and scrape or trim away blood clots or areas of tissue damage from around wounds to avoid contamination.
10. Skin the animal as quickly as possible, especially in warm weather.
11. Keep exposed meat as dry as you can, moisture increases the chance of bacteria growing.
12. Protect the carcass from flies, feces or debris from the environment. The best way to keep flies away is to pack meat in good-quality cloth game bags. Some prefer cotton or canvas bags, while some prefer cheesecloth that will allow air flow. Make sure it fits loosely around the meat.
  - a. The objective is to keep the meat cool, dry and loosely packed so that it stays cool while transported.
  - b. If you spend the night outdoors, hang the meat in a tree, so that it will stay cool and dry and away from scavengers.
  - c. If the weather is warm, cover loosely with the game bags and include ice containers when you are ready to transport it. Using plastic bags or tarps to wrap a carcass is not advised since they hold heat, allowing bacteria to grow and leading to meat spoilage. Move the meat to a cool site, preferably cold storage or a butcher for cutting, as quickly as possible.

Your will not get a replacement licence if your meat was spoiled or became contaminated as a result of improper handling of the meat.

\*\*\*If you harvest a large ungulate, it should be split down the spine as soon as practical to assist in cooling the thickest part of the animal (this has been an area of spoilage for Roosevelt Elk).

\*\*\*If a large ungulate must be left overnight in the bush due to unforeseen reasons, the animal should be completely skinned (after gutting) and be kept off the ground (ie. with logs) so air can circulate to aid in cooling the carcass.

There are many resources within the hunting community with further information on methods of field dressing. Just remember the basics, be safe and enjoy your hunt and your memories in the field and in the dining room! Feel free to call with your questions.