

SKULL CLEANING AND PREPARATION

With a properly prepared skull, successful participants can have a very special and unique trophy which in addition to memories of the hunt, will provide a wonderful display and conversation piece.

Unless you have access to a university zoology department or large museum where they maintain a dermestid (carrion beetle) colony, you will best be served by the old standby, Twenty Mule Team Borax, and cold water maceration technique. Forget about the popular folk mythology recommending fire ant mounds. Along with scavengers digging under whatever wire cage you set up and breaking up and scattering your materials, they are not going to be remarkably helpful in any way. As in other areas of life, plan on using common sense and investing time and effort, following these steps: Since the American alligator comes under US Fish & Wildlife Service as well as DNR regulations, be sure to save tags/permits to prove you have legally acquired alligator parts. Documentation will also have to accompany such parts to a taxidermist or other preparer.

1). After your alligator is dead and be absolutely sure that it has in fact expired, use a knife to separate the head at the first neck vertebra. Potential world record bear skulls have been ruined by over-zealous axemanship. Cut off the most easily accessed large chunks of flesh including jowls and tongue. Mix a saturate solution of borax in cold water in a sufficiently large plastic bucket or trash can and soak the head for three or four days and no more than a week.

2). For the next and most difficult step, you will need a propane burner and large steel or aluminum pot. Mix a fresh borax solution and boil the head until the hide can be removed and the teeth loosen and can easily be pulled out. This will typically require an hour and possibly longer, until most of the meat falls off or can be pulled away.

3). It is helpful to have an air compressor blowgun attachment to remove pulp from tooth cavities. Returning 76 to 80 teeth to their respective sockets can be problematic so it is best to segregate them. I use egg cartons labeled upper and lower and right and left sides to keep teeth organized.

4). The head may have to be returned to the boiling pot to loosen the most stubborn hide and adhering flesh but do not overdo this. Here again, compressed air is useful to remove flesh from tooth sockets, cranial cavity, sinuses, and other recesses. Save bone fragments as damaged areas can be reconstructed.

5). After drying, usually for a day or two, a Dremel tool can be effectively used to clean remaining bits of adhering flesh, hide, and bone spurs. Use Super Glue to repair sutures which separated or strengthen ones that are starting to separate. For more extensive repairs and "jigsaw restoration" of gunshot damage, use taxidermists' compound.

6). Since mandibles will loosen and may separate entirely, they can be stabilized with Super Glue or taxidermists' compound, and permanently fixed with pre-drilled holes and stainless screws. Use clamps or surgical tubing so the right and left sides will dry in the right position fitted into the maxillary or upper jaw.

7). Bleaching with a 50/50 chlorine bleach/water solution cannot be recommended as this tends to make bone material powdery and weak. A far more effective method is to make a paste from 40 volume peroxide gel and bleaching powder available from beauty salon supply stores. Apply to all parts of the skull with an old paint brush, place in a laundry bag or other large clear plastic bag, and leave in the sun for two or three days. Place on white cardboard or kraft paper as colors from a dark source such as porch decking may be absorbed. Re-apply whitening paste as necessary. It is best to wear rubber gloves and avoid inhaling fumes. When satisfied with the results, rinse thoroughly with a garden hose and clean with a brush as necessary. After drying, attend to any remaining adhering flesh or hide with your Dremel tool.

8). Teeth can be re-cemented prior to whitening or afterwards for more natural looking stained teeth. Fit them all into their respective cavities. Some of them may swell, requiring some sanding and fitting. After insuring their proper respective placement, permanently re-cement with epoxy or taxidermists' compound.

9). Using a suitable permanent marker over lightly penciled guidelines, label the hard palate with your permit number, harvest date and location, length and weight, and your name. Finish with one or two coats of clear lacquer as opposed to varnish which tends to yellow over time. Congratulations; having completed this fairly tedious task, you now have a unique trophy to compliment your hunt memories.

MISCELLANEOUS ISSUES

Your alligator permit provides a unique opportunity. This is a privilege and something very special and should be respected as such. Please hold our game animals, actually all of our animals and plants, with great respect because they are gifts and they are sacred. It is vitally important that we respect not only our game animals but our fellow hunters and non-hunters, and landowners both private and public. We must also be thankful and ever mindful of the habitat that produces these animals. This is simply not the day and time for hunters to give the slightest suggestion that they do not quite understand the difference between right and wrong.

Good luck and good hunting!

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