

# ELK Quartering

An easier way  
to haul out big game

By Dan Crank and Charlie Logsdon

Illustrations by Obie Williams

**A**FTER ALL THE excitement of being drawn for a Kentucky elk tag, the days of scouting, and finally, making the shot, you walk up to your elk with a big smile on your face. Your grin begins to droop as you realize how big an elk really is – you can't just tie a rope to the legs and drag it a quarter mile as you would a deer. The real work is about to begin.

Elk hunters in western states often don't have the option of driving their ATV or truck to the spot where they've downed an animal. And a growing number of elk hunters in Kentucky are experiencing the difficulties of bringing a big bull out of a roadless hollow or off an inaccessible mountaintop.

Many elk hunters have discovered that the only way to get that 600-pound animal to the truck is to quarter it. Cutting an elk into its hams, shoulders and loins for transport is certainly easier than dragging out the whole animal.

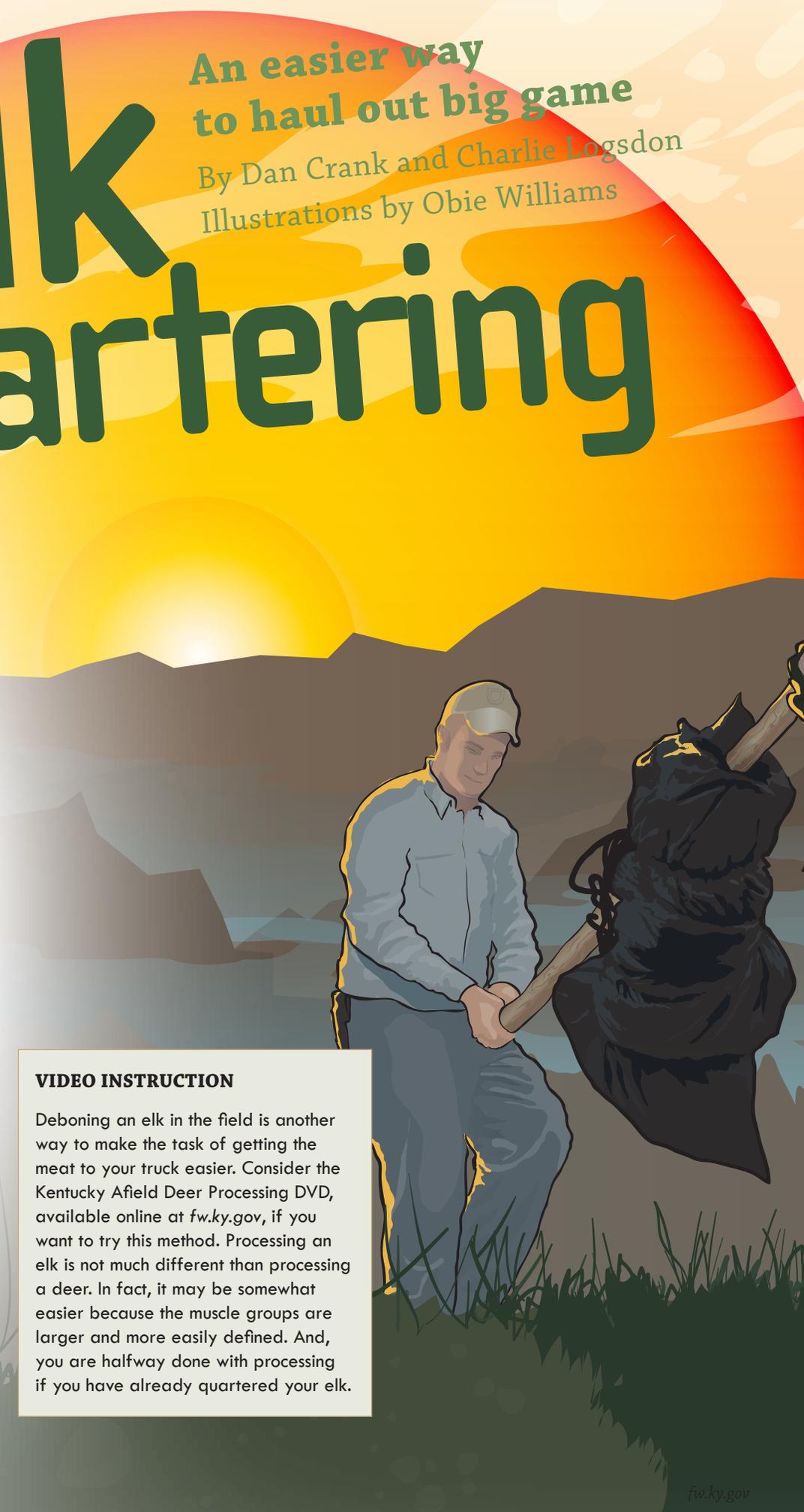
After you've telechecked your elk, try these step-by-step instructions for quartering it. These instructions also work for deer, in case you want to bring just the meat home instead of the whole carcass.

Field dressing an animal prior to quartering helps cool the carcass and can make it easier to manage. However, this can attract a large number of flies. With practice, you may find it better to quarter the animal before field dressing it. You should eventually field dress the animal so that you can cut out the tenderloins underneath the backbone.

Try these techniques on your elk hunt – and keep that smile on your face.

## VIDEO INSTRUCTION

Deboning an elk in the field is another way to make the task of getting the meat to your truck easier. Consider the Kentucky Afield Deer Processing DVD, available online at [fw.ky.gov](http://fw.ky.gov), if you want to try this method. Processing an elk is not much different than processing a deer. In fact, it may be somewhat easier because the muscle groups are larger and more easily defined. And, you are halfway done with processing if you have already quartered your elk.





## 1 To skin or not to skin

You can quarter an elk with the hide on or off. If you can get the meat to a processor quickly and the air temperature is less than 40 degrees, such as during the December cow elk hunt, you can leave the hide on.

If the weather is hot – such as the 90-degree temperatures experienced by Kentucky’s bull elk hunters last October – then you should remove the hide. The hide and underlying fat insulate the meat and keep it from cooling quickly, increasing the risk of spoilage. Just putting bags of ice in the chest cavity won’t cool an elk’s big hams and quarters.

If you’re not having the elk mounted by a taxidermist, start by laying the animal on its side. Make a cut along the spine from the tail to the head. Now simply cut the skin from the underlying muscle down to the second joint on the legs. Have a helper pull away the hide while you slice the connective tissue between the skin and muscle. This is no time for sloppy knifework – be careful not to slice through the other side of the hide and poke your helper.

Make a cut just below each leg joint and cut all the way around the leg. Finish removing the hide. Now cut straight through the bone below the second joint with your saw. On the rear leg, leave the major tendon on the back of the leg intact. You can cut a hole between this tendon and the leg bone to help you carry and hang the rear quarter.



# 2

## Removing the shoulders

Removing the shoulder is easy because there is not a joint holding it to the body. To remove it, have someone lift the front leg away from the body. Cut under the front leg while staying close to the ribcage. Keep cutting all the way to the spine. Be careful not to cut into the back loins at the top of the spine. Place the shoulder into a game bag.



### THE ESSENTIAL SEVEN

The proper equipment is essential for quartering an elk. Be sure to have these items for your hunt.

**1. Knife:** A high-quality hunting knife with a blade length of at least 3½ inches, or butcher-grade boning knives.

**2. Sharpener:** Use a sharpening steel, quality whetstone or diamond stone. Know how to sharpen your knife properly – more often than not, your knife will become dull while field dressing and quartering your elk.

**3. Saw:** Compact or folding saws are the best, especially if they have specific blades for cutting bone.

**4. Rope:** Quarter-inch rope can hold your elk on a steep hillside. You can also use it to tie the meat to a backpack. Use cotton rope, as nylon rope slips and will not keep tight knots.

**5. Tarp:** Use a small tarp to keep meat off the ground while quartering.

**6. Game bags:** Five large (Alaskan) cloth game bags to protect the meat from dirt.

**7. External frame backpack:** Get a beefy model to carry in equipment and carry out the meat.





## Removing the hindquarters

Remove the hindquarters by either sawing or cutting them away from the carcass.

Sawing is the faster of these two methods, and allows you to move the meat more quickly. First, saw through the pelvic bone between the hindquarters. Next, saw across the spine where the end of the back loin meets the hindquarter. You now have split the carcass in half. The final cut with the saw is to split the spine from the tail to where you cut the spine in half.

If you are elk hunting in a state that has chronic wasting disease (CWD), do not saw through bone or the spine. You risk contaminating the meat and spreading the disease. Instead, use your knife to remove the hindquarters and debone the meat before bringing it back to Kentucky.

Chronic wasting disease has not been found in Kentucky. However, because of concerns over the spread of this disease, other states may have similar laws. Non-resident elk hunters should check their own state's regulations on bringing back an elk carcass or meat.

You can still split the hindquarters even if you don't use a saw. First, lay the animal on its side. Then, starting at the point where the back loin ended, cut into the meat as deeply as you can. Continue cutting towards the tail. Next, spread the elk's legs. At the point where the hindquarters come together, cut down to the middle of the pelvic bone.

Next, lay the animal on its back and cut straight down between the quarters until you hit bone. Use your knife to cut the meat away from the bone, following the pelvic bone while someone helps pull the leg away from the carcass.

Keep cutting until you hit the ball joint. Cut all the way around the joint to separate it while your helper pulls the leg away from the pelvis. Remove the hindquarter by continuing to cut along the pelvic bone until your knife meets the cut made downward from the spine. Your helper should be prepared to hold the heavy hindquarter off the ground while you put it into a fresh game bag. The rib and neck meat is easiest to remove now.

## Finishing

Once you're finished with the first side, flip the carcass over and repeat these steps on the other side. Doing one side at a time helps keep the meat cleaner. ■

# 3

### Removing the back loins

Back loins, or back straps, are the tube-shaped muscles that run along either side of the spine. They are one of the best cuts of meat on an elk or deer.

Find the start of this muscle near the spine at the top of the hindquarter. Cut across it. Next, insert your knife blade parallel to the spine until you feel it hit bone. Make a long cut along the spine to the base of the neck, keeping the blade as close to the bone as possible. Remove the loin by cutting it away from the ribcage, then slicing across the meat at the neck.

You should have a three-foot-long cut of meat about the diameter of a baseball. Place the loin into a fresh game bag. Use the same bag for the other loin. Use the same technique to remove the tenderloins, which you'll find along the spine inside of the body cavity. Add these to the bag with the back loins.

# 4