

Sewing With Fur

Cory Farnsworth

02/06/2025

History of Using Fur



Figure 1. *A Finished*

Trapper Hat Made of Skunk Pelts

Throughout history, humans have valued fur. Garments made of fur were essential for cold-weather protection and, in many instances, replaced money to trade with others for life's necessities (Krause, 1984). Skilled trappers and furriers were employed to clothe both the rich and the poor. Fur only began to lose popularity when wool and cotton could be produced on a greater scale. Recently, wool and cotton production has also declined due to the more economical production of materials made from petroleum, such as polyester and nylon. Fur is still widely used around the world today. In 2022, the fur industry accounted for over \$2.5 billion in sales worldwide, with China, Finland, the United States, and many Asian countries remaining top consumers ([TrendEconomy, 2024](#)).

About Fur

Fur is the pelt or skin of an animal tanned as leather with the hair intact. Animals that produce fur are called furbearers. These can include predators like coyotes and herbivores such as beavers and muskrats. Originally, hunters and trappers primarily harvested fur, but now fur farms produce about 50% of fur in North America and about 85% worldwide ([Truth About Fur, 2022](#)). In the early

history of America, many furbearer populations declined due to overharvesting.

Today, trapping is one of the most regulated activities worldwide and is a useful tool in managing excess populations of furbearers and struggling populations of prey animals. Fur is slowly regaining popularity as people recognize it as more ethical, humane, economical, and renewable, but the ability to use fur is becoming a lost art. It is part of our heritage as a people and connects us with the land. Learning to sew fur projects can be fun and, in some cases, quite profitable, as fur sewn into an article will sell far above the price of the pelt itself. If you normally sell fur but are discouraged by low fur prices, consider making something out of your catch.

Where to Begin

When choosing fur to make a clothing article, consider the use of that piece. Some fur like muskrat, otter, and beaver naturally shed water which is why they make good mittens and caps. Other fur, like wolverine, sheds frost more easily than others, making excellent hood trim (Ward, 2019). Some fur is better suited for cold temperatures while others are better suited for mild weather. If you have the option of catching your own fur, be sure to follow state rules and regulations. In Utah, this information can be found in the current Utah Division of Wildlife Resources *Furbearer Guidebook*. In some cases, you may even use the fur from nuisance animals. The pelts used for this article are skunks caught near the author's chicken coop.

Quality



Figure 2. *A Prime Coyote*

in Winter

It is important to make sure the pelt is tanned properly. A hide that has only been dried and salted is not truly tanned. Tanning is the process that turns the skin to leather and ensures that the skin will not rot or continue to break down. While it is possible to tan your own fur, it is usually cheaper and easier to have your fur tanned professionally. This process is usually called garment tanning if you plan to use the pelt for sewing projects.

Another consideration is the quality of fur. Quality can mean several things. Is the fur prime? Prime refers to the underfur and guard hairs being completely grown out. Pelts become prime due to photoperiod or length of light in a day, as days get shorter and nights get longer in the fall. They then shed their fur when daylight hours begin to increase. This process varies by location, latitude, elevation, and species ([The Northeast Furbearer Resources Technical Committee \[NFRTC\], 2015](#)). A pelt that was harvested between late fall and winter will be most prime, while a pelt harvested at any other time holds very little value. The hunting and trapping seasons of these animals closely align with this cycle.

The fur's quality will also change with climate. Locations with cooler winter climates will produce animals with thicker fur. Animals that don't need to withstand extreme temperatures don't need to grow their fur as dense.

Picking Pelts

When picking pelts for a project, it is important that they match in color, size, and quality. This will make things much easier as you piece together hides for your garment, enhance the aesthetics of the finished project, and often hide most flaws made by the hobbyist.

The next thing to do is to pick a pattern that will work for you. Most patterns can be tweaked to fit different shapes and sizes once you have something you like. Some people are skilled in creating patterns and will not need to find an existing pattern. Testing the pattern with cheap material is advised so that any mistakes won't ruin your pelts. The author used paper sacks from the grocery store to test several patterns until one was found to work.

Preparing the Pelts

Repairing Damage



Figure 3. *Repairing a*

hole in the Pelt

Once you have chosen your pelts and pattern, the first thing to do is to repair any holes and weak or bare spots in the pelt. Use a scapula blade or sharp knife to cut a small

football-shaped hole around the damaged area. Close the hole with a baseball stitch, poking the needle up through the hair side on both sides of the cut and pulling to close (Figure 3). Try to keep the fur out of the stitch. Tying a double square knot or other knot tight against the leather side is recommended to secure the stitching.

To stitch pelts, a glover's needle and waxed thread are needed; often, non-scented dental floss will work. The help of a sewing machine may be enlisted, but most machines cannot handle the thickness of fur and leather, so before you start, make sure your machine is suitable for the job. If sewing by hand, thicker pelts may require the furrier to wear a thick leather glove to push the needle through.

Blocking

After finishing all pelt repairs, the pelts can now be blocked. Blocking is the process of stretching the hide to make it more uniform in shape and help it lay flat. First, very lightly wet the skin side of the pelts; a spray bottle works great (Figure 4). Take care to ensure the hide doesn't get too damp. After letting it sit for a few minutes, the pelt should be supple and stretchy. Now the pelt can be pinned and stretched against a board, fur side down (Figure 5). Don't overstretch. The goal is eliminating wrinkles and making the shape more uniform. If your pelt doesn't fit the pattern comfortably, you will need a larger pelt. Wait for the pelts to dry. A fan can speed up this process.



Figure 4. *Pelts Hang*

After Being Dampened



Figure 5. *Pelts Are*

Stretched and Tacked Into Place, With Pattern Seen at Left

Cutting the Pattern



Figure 6. *The Pattern Is*

Drawn Onto the Pelt and Ready to Cut Out

Now that the pelts are flat and dry, trace the pattern (Figure 6.). Be sure to leave at least 1/4 inch to stitch (this space is usually included in the pattern, but make sure). Check that the fur is running in the right direction. It can be difficult to line up stripes or unique markings on pelts (such as in Figure 8). Next, cut out the pieces. Be sure to use a sharp knife or scapula, cut from the skin side, and cut only the leather. Do not cut the hair.

Sewing It Together

When stitching the pelts together, keep the fur inside, which will help to hide the seam. It is helpful to start from the middle and work to the edge, which ensures that the pieces are stitched together evenly and allows for a more manageable thread length. Fur is different than most fabric, and parts of the pelt may have different thicknesses, and some parts will stretch more than others. If you notice that one side is becoming longer than the other, it is possible to pinch the long end together occasionally to “catch up.” Using the “over and over stitch” or “whip stitch” is advised. Do this by poking the needle in one side of the leather, pulling tight, and then poking it back in on the same side as your initial direction (Figure 7).



Figure 7. *Stitching the Pelts Together Using a “Whip Stitch”*

With everything sewn together, you may add a liner. Using the same pattern, cut out a liner and repeat the process of sewing it to the leather. Sometimes batting is used, but often the fur is warm enough without any. Adding a liner is accomplished by again turning the product inside out so that the fur is between the liner and the leather. As long as there is an unstitched hole, the article can be turned back to the fur side to make the last stitches. This process helps to keep fur out of the way when sewing and keep the stitches against the leather rather than the fur. Occasionally, the lining may need a holding stitch, as done on blankets and quilts. Heavy felt, finished leather, and wool products are popular liner options.

The Finished Product



Figure 8. *A Finished*

Trapper Hat Made From Four Skunk Pelts

Fur can last a very long time under the right conditions. Avoid getting oils on the fur and keep it as clean and dry as possible. Very soiled or wet fur cannot be washed or dried like normal clothing because it is leather. If your fur article needs cleaning or has become wet, get it cleaned by a professional furrier or dry cleaner. If the fur has only become slightly damp, a fan or cool air can dry and fluff it back up. Fur should not be smashed or crushed but

treated gently and hung up when not in use. Fur will last longer if stored out of direct sunlight and away from heat (Jayley, 2022). Now you are ready to enjoy the style and warmth only a fur product can bring.

Image Credit

All images were provided by the author.

References

- Jayley. (2022). *How to care for natural fur*. Accessed January 3, 2025, from <https://www.jayley.com/blog/how-to-care-for-natural-fur/#:~:text=Difficult%20stains%20should%20be%20removed,on%20a%20real%20fur%20coat>.
- Krause, T. (1984). An American heritage. In *NTA trapping handbook* (2nd ed., pp. 12–12). The Covington Group.
- TrendEconomy. (2024). *Furskins and artificial fur; manufactures thereof: Imports and exports: 2023*. TrendEconomy World Merchandise Exports and Imports by Commodity (HS). Accessed January 3, 2025, from https://trendeconomy.com/data/commodity_h2/43
- Truth About Fur. (2022). *Facts about fur farming*. Accessed 3 January 2025. <https://www.truthaboutfur.com/how-fur-is-produced/farming/facts-about-fur-farming/>
- Ward, S. (2019). *How does wolverine fur work? Hint: It's not hydrophobic* [Web log post]. Truth About Fur. Accessed January 3, 2025, from <https://www.truthaboutfur.com/how-does-wolverine-fur-work/>

[Download PDF](#)

Authors

Cory Farnsworth, USU Extension Assistant Professor, Agriculture and Natural Resources - Grand County



February 2025
Utah State University Extension
Peer-reviewed fact sheet