

from the book **Buckskin: The Ancient Art of Braintanning**
by Steven Edholm and Tamara Wilder
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WHY MAKE BUCKSKIN?

Braintanned buckskin, when well made, is the most virtuous soft “suede type” leather that we know of. It is strong, beautiful, warm, washable, comfortable, very supple, and bio-friendly. Those who get to know braintan usually disdain to use any other soft leather.



Buckskin is pretty much at its best as clothing. It feels warm against the skin, while many other leathers feel clammy and kind of plastic-like. Clammy leathers feel cold and clammy because of the tanning agents used in them. Many modern leathers are tanned using chromium salts, which add considerable weight and a cold inorganic feeling to the skin. (While we like heavy metals in our music, we can do without them in our leather.) Also, some skins which are softened with oils feel colder and heavier than braintanned skin. The active ingredients in brain function like an oil but do not

leave the skin feeling heavy, greasy, or clammy.

The clammy feeling of most commercially tanned skins is compounded by the fact that they do not breathe as well as buckskin does. If worn in the heat of a warm day, commercially tanned skins tend to cause the wearer to swelter, often feeling more like vinyl than leather. Many shiny leathers actually have a layer of plastic applied to them.

The breathability of braintanned buckskin makes it more comfortable in warmer weather; yet, since the fibers of the skin are well fluffed and open, buckskin is very insulative for its thickness. Buckskin is also very wind resistant, which is another important warmth factor.

Smoked braintan is washable with just water and soap. Some other leathers are, and some are not.

“...It is a fact worthy of notice, that skins dressed by the Indians, that is, those which have been smoked, are never injured by worms, and are not liable to become hard, or to stretch, after having been wet, as are the pliant ones of the professed leather-dressers among the white people.”

Memoirs of a Captivity Among the Indians of North America from childhood to the age of nineteen) John D. Hunter, London, 1823

Another virtue of buckskin is its durability. Braintanning works by conditioning the skin throughout, thereby allowing the tanner to manually soften it. Most skins are “pickled” in acids or, as mentioned, chromium salts, which can weaken the skin considerably. For instance, the average commercially tanned deer skin tends to be very weak.

Many of the commercial tanning processes are horrendously polluting as well. Buckskin and the by-products of making it are completely biodegradable, unless you purchase brains in plastic or Styrofoam containers.

As for the shortcomings of buckskin, we don't think there are that many. The worst one is that it's so much work to produce, which also makes buckskin very expensive to buy. It's so expensive that we can't even afford it, and we make it! We're way behind on making buckskin clothes for ourselves, because

we have had to sell almost all of it to make a living. Of course, being primitive technologists, we don't have normal jobs. If you have a normal job, you can tan on the weekends and make yourself a set of clothes. Aren't you lucky?

Another drawback is that buckskin is not much protection from the rain: it absorbs water like a sponge. You may be better off protecting your buckskins from the rain until you can find a dry place to put them back on.

Lastly, buckskin is very stretchy and can tend to re-adjust in ways you don't want it to, like sagging butts and baggy knees. Stretchiness can also be desirable, though, in that buckskin clothing conforms to your body and movement patterns. This quality means that each piece quickly becomes moulded and customized to the owner's body. The negative aspects of stretchiness can, in most cases, be minimized by good clothing construction techniques; so, really, this is just as much of an advantage as it is a disadvantage.

Another leather worthy of notice as a good and useful one is that which is vegetable tanned by the action of tannic acid from various plant sources. Vegetable tanning and the subsequent treatment of the skin (i.e. softening, compressing, etc...) can produce a wide variety of leathers for differing applications. While buckskin is soft, stretchy, and clothlike-vegetable tanned leather is less stretchy and can be made either pliable or stiff and hard. Vegetable tan is the perfect complimentary leather to buckskin, since it's well suited for making sheaths, holsters, shoes, belts, and so on. Buckskin is best suited for clothing, soft bags, moccasins, and any other use requiring a clothlike material. Fortunately, we are not yet well versed enough in the production of vegetable tannage to feel compelled to include it in this book, but some discussion is undertaken in Chapter 26, Dyeing Buckskin.