

Fish Leather Tanning

Thunder Bay Indigenous
Friendship Centre

Teachings and Instructions

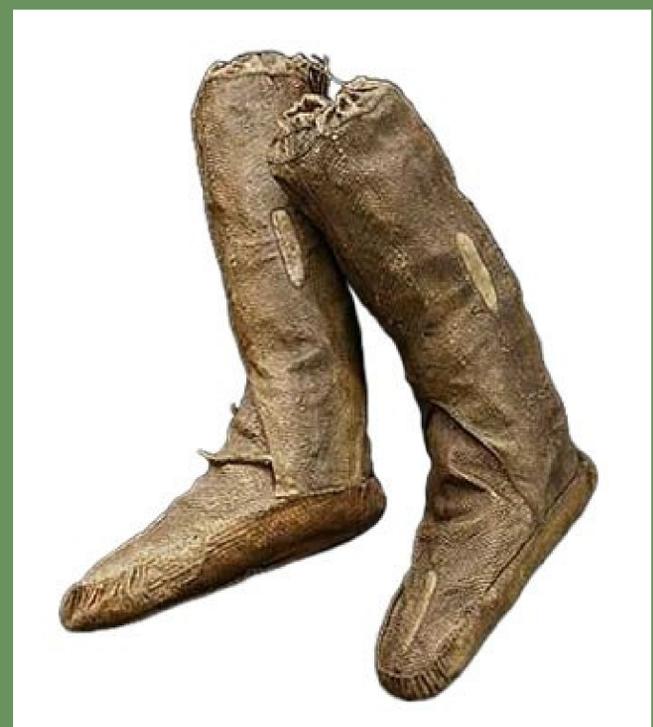
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In the Anishinaabe culture fish play a large role. They are one of our main food sources and the entire village would participate in harvesting and preparing the meat for storage. Within the culture, out of respect, we try to use as much of that animal as possible. It gave its life to sustain us and there is a deep respect as an Anishinaabe person to honour that gift and respect our environment. Right now is the time you will see many families out fishing. The land tells us when it is time to go onto the next activity, and more are returning to the ways of natural law. With the fish making their journey to spawn they will be leaving Lake Superior to the rivers. This journey is something that like the Anishinaabe has always been a part of Turtle Island and is part of natural law. After winter in the big lake, it leaves the fish skins thick and tough. Small pieces of information like the thickness of the fish skin holds so much traditional knowledge and serves as a reminder of the ways the land communicates with us.

The Indigenous populations across Turtle Island have used fish leather since time immemorial. With colonization there was a loss of that practice and culture. Now within some communities we are starting to see a resurgence of traditional knowledge. Our ways aren't lost – we carry it with us in our blood memory. Finding the way back to that knowledge is a personal journey for each individual. With Covid shutting down the country, it has left many lost and struggling to stay occupied, but for others it was a much needed chance to shut off the noise and regain focus. My community of Fort William First Nation has seen more and more individuals return to the land and find old ways within themselves they didn't know existed. I have decided to attempt to regain the knowledge and skill of making fish leather. My family enjoys spending time in the spring fishing for pickerel, so this gave me a great opportunity to explore that.



Fish Skin Coat

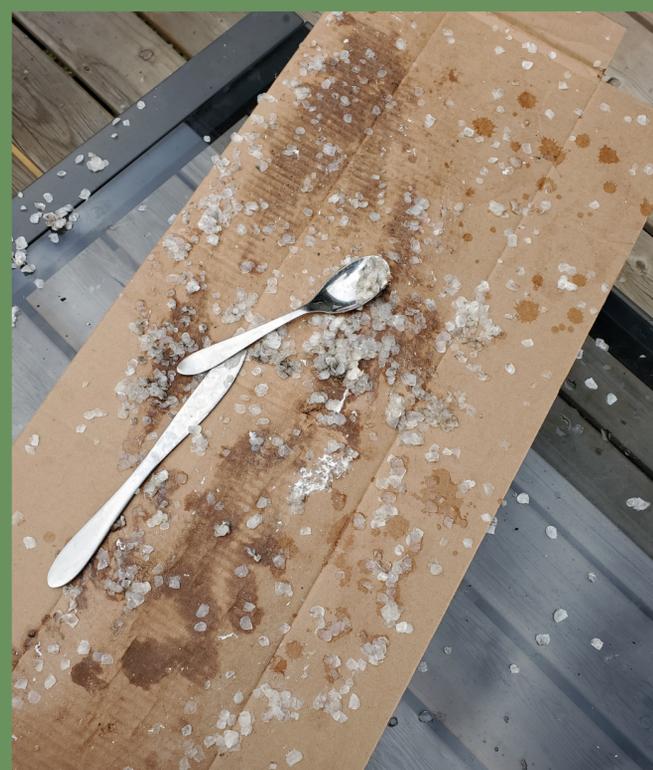


Fish Skin Boots

DAY ONE:

You will need: fish skin, 2 mason jars, 2 boxes of red rose black tea, and salt.

1. Let the water cool. NEVER EVER place cold water fish skins in hot or warm water. COLD WATER ONLY
2. With a spoon you want to scrape out any remaining fish skin, fat deposits and debris. Its messy but the cleaner you ensure the skin is the better it will tan.
3. On the scale side of the skin you may want to go outside and have some cardboard down on the area you're going to work on. This may be a good time to fashion yourself a garbage bag poncho as the scales will get everywhere. If you have children around let them try working with the skin, dodging fish scales makes for good laughter. Take the spoon and starting at the tail end work slowly up towards the head end of the skin. Scales will fly once you find your groove.
4. Once this is done and all your scales have been removed wash the skins off. COLD WATER and dish soap. The dish soap will remove any left-over fats.
5. Wring out your skins by hand - they are now ready for the tea mix.
6. **wait until your tea water is cold to add the skins**
7. Tea Mix for Day 1: - You will need 5 tea bags on day one. Add salt to the water. I have no measurement for this measure like your adding it to the potatoes pot
8. I leave the jars without lids so I can stir it when I walk by throughout the day. (you want to stir it as much as you remember to each day to help the tannins work into the skin)



DAY TWO:

1. Make new tea water in your second jar (this is why I like having 2 jars so I don't have to worry or make a mess transferring skins)
2. 10 tea bags NO SALT - your done with the salt- it was just for first day to help preserve and protect the skins

DAY THREE:

1. 15 tea bags go into your new water & transfer skins
2. Remember to stir it up as your day goes on

DAY FOUR:

1. 20 tea bags for your new water
2. Stay at 20 for the remaining days now. And keep stirring it.

DAY FIVE:

1. 20 tea bags again
2. Today cut a strip or end corner off to check if the skins are brown all the way through. This means its working and your almost done

DAY SIX:

1. Wash the skins in cold water and dish soap
2. Wring them out by hand & place to dry flat on a towel
3. You can place paper towel over and roll them in towel to gather more water out.
4. Once dry add oil (use whatever you have – olive oil, bear grease, bacon grease, margarine etc.)
5. Oil the front and back
6. While putting the oil on work in with hands and stretch until its dry (30 mins?) – some have used hair dryers to speed up drying time
7. Do a second oiling and allow it to dry again

DAY SEVEN:

1. If you have left your leather to dry overnight today is “working it” day
2. Begin to stretch your leather. You can use the edge of tables or counters or some people have moose antler tools they have made with rounded edges to help in process of stretching
3. Keep working your leather until its dry and is flexible
4. You can add more oil if needed to help work it back into soft material
5. once done some add bees wax leather conditioner to give it a shine – this is optional

