

How-To



A Frontiersman's Coonskin Hat Rosemary Greene*

Originally worn by American Indians, it was adopted by the frontiersmen and trappers they traded with. Ben Franklin wore one, but Daniel Boone preferred a bowler. Disney started a craze for them in the 1950s. A professional hat maker shows you how to make your own.

Nothing says American West like a coonskin hat. The caps were originally a traditional Native American article of clothing, but when European pioneers began settling the Tennessee and Kentucky areas, they made it their own and wore them as hunting caps.

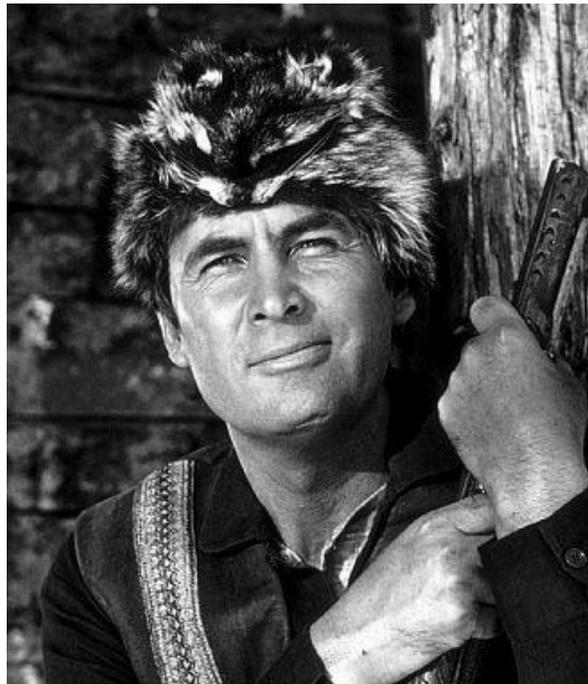


Explorer Meriwether Lewis wore a coonskin cap during the Lewis and Clark Expedition.

The hat was popularized in the 1950's by Walt Disney movies and television series about Daniel Boone and Davy Crockett, both portrayed by Fess Parker (right). I can still remember the melody and words to the TV show: "[Davy, Davy Crockett, King of the Wild Frontier!](#)" Every little boy either

owned or wanted to own a real live coonskin hat. More often they were made of fake fur but to the boys I knew, that made no difference. I think my brothers even wore theirs to bed.

Daniel Boone's descendants say that he never wore one and preferred a felt bowler. Other sources claim that Davy Crockett would only wear a coonskin hat when making public appearances. This is another case of legend becoming reality. As John Ford wrote in *The Man Who Shot Liberty*



Fess Parker portrayed Davy Crockett in a 1950s Walt Disney series. The real Davy Crockett only wore one for public appearances. Photo: Walt Disney Productions



Portrait of Benjamin Franklin wearing a coonskin cap in France, c. 1777.

Valance (1960), "When the legend becomes fact, print the legend."

Interestingly, though, Benjamin Franklin did wear one. The French court thought that anyone in the colonies would be a frontiersman, so although he lived in Paris, Franklin figured it would help to play along. Legend has it that he ordered a coonskin cap sent to France (above). Biographer Walter Isaacson claims that it was made of soft marten fur. Whichever it was, he and the hat were a big hit with the ladies of the court.

Although it is very reasonable to make a coonskin hat from fake fur – and there are some really lovely faux raccoon fabrics out there - to a purist, nothing takes the place of the real thing. There are a number of online companies both here and around the world that sell real raccoon skins (see references at the end of the article). These are not only reasonably priced, from about \$40.00 to \$120.00 depending on quality and size, but have the head and tail intact for that completely authentic look.



Choose a skin that is supple with firmly rooted hair.

My brother's raccoon hats did not show the raccoon face in the front as this would have been a lot of work when done in faux fur and increased the price to outside my parent's budget. I had 5 brothers and we weren't that rich! My belief is that in the days when a trapper made his own raccoon hat, the entire animal would have been used, including the face.

For the example in this article, I used the face and tail but did not put in faux eyes. Again, this is in the belief that a trapper would not have gone to the trouble of finding something to use in place of the eyes, even if faux eyes were available at the time. Also I'm not sure that anyone in today's world would like to have a raccoon face staring them down during an entire conversation with the wearer.

Buying the Skin

Look for a large skin that is free of bald spots and blemishes. The skin side should feel supple and not look dry, cracked or crumbly. Test the fur by pulling gently on a small clump. If the hair doesn't pull out, the skin is probably in good condition and will last many years if well-cared for. The rings on the tail should be well marked and full. If you have a large head size, you may need 2 skins and cut the crown top and face from one skin and all the side bands from another.

Cutting the Fur Pieces

It is important to avoid cutting through the long fur on the front of the skin when cutting the pieces. For this reason the pattern pieces are drawn on the skin side and also cut out from this side. There are 2 ways to cut the fur: 1. use a razor (like an Xacto knife) and cut only through the skin, pulling the pieces apart as you cut or 2. Use a small sharp scissors with a very sharp point and carefully cut just through just the skin. This second technique would also work well with faux fur.



Use sharp razor to cut only through the skin of real fur.

Making the Hat

The shape of this hat is essentially a [Pill Box](#) hat with flat sides and a round or oval crown. The depth of the side band is a personal choice. Some people may like the hat to sit lower on their head so it barely clears the eyebrows – thus a wider band. It's a good idea to make a prototype (using some



Scissors with very sharp point are suitable for faux fur.



Draw crown and side bands on skin side (steps 6 and 7).

and cut a circle out of cardboard. Example: 7.3 divided by 2 equals 3.6 inches. Check that the circumference of the crown piece is about $\frac{1}{2}$ inch longer around than the two side bands. The seam allowance is about $\frac{1}{4}$ inch on the top piece and when joined to the side pieces, will take up this extra $\frac{1}{2}$ inch.

Step 5. For an oval crown: follow Steps 2 – 4 above. Then decrease the radius by $\frac{1}{2}$ inch on each side and add $\frac{1}{2}$ inch to the front and back. Use a French curve to draw a smooth curve.



As you pin, brush the fur down between the raw edge (step 8).

very cheap faux fur) to check the fit before cutting into that gorgeous coonskin. Here are the general steps.

Step 1. Measure your head circumference. Place tape about 1 inch above eyebrows and over the fullest part curve at the back of the head.

Step 2. Cut a 4 inch wide band of cardboard or heavy paper to this measure. Cut the band into half. Add $\frac{1}{2}$ inch to the end of each piece to allow for a $\frac{1}{4}$ inch seam in the front and $\frac{1}{4}$ inch seam at the back of the hat. Example: 23 inches divided by 2 equals 11.5 inches. Add $\frac{1}{2}$ inch on each side band piece or 12 inches per piece.

Step 3. Using your circumference measurement, divide it by 3.1417 (π) to get the diameter of your head. Example: 23 divided by 3.1417 equals 7.3 inches.

Step 4. For a round crown: Divide the diameter in half and using that radius, scribe



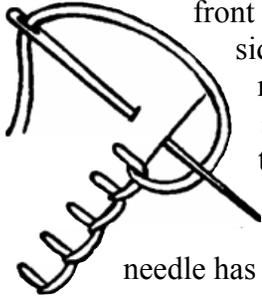
Position the crown piece (circle/oval) down directly behind the eyes or ears (step 8).

Step 6. Lay the coonskin hide out flat, fur side down. Position the crown piece (circle/oval) down directly behind the eyes or ears (left). This is a design choice. I've seen photos of Fess Parker in coonskin hats with and without the face in the front. I decided to have the face on the hat as I think the men who wore these originally would not have wasted any part of the animal. If using an oval crown, remember to position the long direction of the oval from front to back. With a marking pen, mark the crown piece on the skin.

Step 7. Position the two side bands along the skin from head to tail and mark.

Step 8. Carefully cut all pieces from the hide. Pin side pieces together, right sides together, making sure that the fur flows from front to back on each side. As you pin, brush the fur down between the raw edge so that no fur pokes up between the seams.

Step 9. Using a [blanket stitch](#), sew the front and back seams of the side bands together with millinery thread or other strong thread. It's easier to use a needle especially made for sewing leather. The needle has a flat part on the tip.



Step 10. Sew the band to the crown, starting at one side of the face and continuing to the other side. Again, be sure the fur on the band and top flows from front to back. Note: the face will wrap over the top of the band when finished and can be tacked down in several spots at the nose and on the sides. Be careful not to pull the thread too tight or you may cut the leather.

Step 11. Cut the tail from the coonskin and blanket-stitch the tail opening together into a tubular shape. Turn the hat right-side out and sew the tail on the back of the hat directly opposite the coon face.

Step 12. When the coonskin hat is complete, you can use the same pattern to cut a satin or flannel lining. The side band can be cut in one piece with a single ½ inch seam at the back. Sew the lining pieces together – this can be done by machine. Turn the fur hat inside out and the lining right side out. Stitch them together around the skin's lower edge. As in Step 8, push the fur down as you pin the pieces together so the fur doesn't poke out of the finished seam. When this is complete, flip the hat fur side out and push the lining to the inside.



Finished raccoon skin hat modeled by Kevin Williamson.

Now, you're ready to step out in an authentic "Davy Crockett" coonskin hat. Enjoy!

Materials and Resources

Here are some places to buy real and faux fur and other materials to make your own raccoon skin hat, and some resources on working with fur.

[I'm Stuffed Fur](#). Imported faux fur fabrics.

[Mendel's](#). Shorter, longer, and plush faux fur fabrics.

[Fur Source](#). Raccoon pelts and other quality furs.

[Glacier Wear](#). Raccoon and other fur pelts and finished fur goods.

[Tandy Leather Factory](#). Leather working supplies, including needles and thread suitable for sewing raccoon skin.

Perry, Patricia. *Everything About Sewing Fur and Fur-like Fabrics from Vogue Patterns*. Butterick Fashion Marketing Co. 1971.

Schwebke, Phyllis W. and Krohn, Margaret B.. *How to Sew Leather, Suede, Fur*. Touchstone Press, 1974. ISBN 978-0020119302. A practical, detailed guide to the techniques of sewing with skins and furs.

Rosemary Greene has loved hats since her childhood, when every Easter her talented mother made her a new outfit and matching hat. Although her mother taught Rosemary to sew, she did not teach her millinery skills. Rosemary never lost her love of wearing hats, and wore one even when no one else did. Several years ago, she began studying costume design at a local college, took a millinery class, and found her true passion! She loves passing on her hat making skills. She teaches Millinery classes through the Los Gatos Saratoga Community Education, and also by arrangement in her home studio. Her hats are sold at Black Cat Hats in Los Gatos CA, Hats on Post in San Francisco CA, or by custom order. She holds a Ed.D from the University of Southern California. Contact her at rgraine@grdi.com or visit her [web site](#) for more information.