

HOW'D THEY DO THAT?



*Taxidermy is a mix of art,
science...hair spray and
Bondo*

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*Ever look closely at a mount of a fish or a deer on a wall and wonder...
“How’d they do that?”*

Most folks who’ve used a taxidermist’s service know how their mount was made and what’s inside it. They’ve been to the taxidermist’s shop. They’ve seen the strange mute-colored forms – or manikins of various creatures. They’ve answered the taxidermist’s questions about how they want their game or fish mounted.

But for those who’ve never been to the taxidermist’s workshop, the process is kind of a mystery.

“It’s a mix of art, science and a whole bunch of skills,” said Leon Verville, a taxidermist from Loudon. For sure. A good taxidermist has to know woodworking, tanning, sculpting, drawing, molding, and sewing, among other things. “You have to know about wildlife and you’ve got to have some artistic ability.”

Verville is one of 43 commercial taxidermists in New Hampshire, a mix of full- and part-timers. Verville began learning the skills when he was 15 – starting off with squirrels – with help from an uncle who was a taxidermist.

While some taxidermists learn at professional taxidermy schools, not Verville. “I went to the school of hard knocks,” he says. “I learned by doing it, making a few mistakes early on, and just sticking with it to get better. I’m still learning today.”

It Ain’t Stuffin’

Taxidermists who’ve been at it for a while will tell you that the craft has advanced dramatically in the past 20 years. Long gone are the days when animal skins were filled with wood shavings, straw, paper or anything else that happened to work.

No wonder the practice is no longer called “stuffing.” And today’s displays are called mounts, not “stuffed animals” (a term better off for teddy bears).

“Now, we have available to us the highest quality materials,” says Jim Dubowik of Hillside Taxidermy in Nashua. “In the mid-1970s everything changed. No more stuffing. No more formaldehyde. It’s a lot better and it’s a lot safer. You’ve got a lot more control over your tanning and you’ve got a wider range of choices for your mount.”

Today’s taxidermists have access to commercial suppliers who deal in mass quantities of all kinds of weird stuff, like artificial eyes, noses, tongues, mouths and ears. Then there are the forms – or manikins – the polyurethane foam cores that fill out the skin. Suppliers offer hundreds of varieties of manikins just for white-tailed deer shoulder mounts.

They’re sculpted by specialized artists who are well known in the trade, like Rick Carter, Sallie Dahmes and Dwayne “Bones” Johnson. Suppliers have manikins for everything you can imagine, from antelopes to zebras. They’ve even got manikins for fish, snakes, squirrels...you name it.

Taxidermy suppliers have catalogs and websites filled with this stuff. If you need a deer shoulder mount with a right-turning head, just order it.

“Taxidermy has come a long way in the past few years,” says Verville. “It’s a lot more realistic. You’ve got a lot more choices in how you can have things mounted and displayed. And there are a lot more choices in terms of materials.”

Hair Spray and Bondo

A taxidermist’s shop is a strange place for a newcomer. It’s usually in a basement or garage. Unlike fly-tying, it’s not something you want to do at the kitchen table.

A typical workshop looks like a combination of an auto body shop, a hair salon and a museum. Scattered on a workbench you’ll see hair spray, brushes, combs, clay, Bondo, airbrushes, glue, spatulas, hammers, nails, pins, screws and all sorts of other tools. Some tools look like something you’d see at the dentist; others look like they’d be used by a surgeon or a seamstress.

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Nashua taxidermist Jim Dubowik readies a bull moose manikin, which will soon have a thick coat and a fine rack.



“Unless you’re here all the time it’s hard to appreciate the amount of work and hours that goes into it. Just one turkey – there’s about three full days that goes into one turkey. It takes hours to comb a turkey’s feathers.”

Ear liners, imitation eyes, brushes, paper clips and tape are but a small part of a taxidermist’s arsenal.



Hanging from the ceilings are pairs of deer antlers, each tagged with the customer’s name. At the right stage in the process, those antlers will go back on the deer’s head, so a taxidermist has to be careful not to mix up antlers. A taxidermist sometimes has to fix antlers that have been cracked, broken or even shot.

A taxidermist’s shop also has boxes from supply companies, full of artificial eyes, plastic ear liners, mouths and all sorts of supplies.

And of course there are mounts all over. Verville’s shop has a few deer shoulder mounts (game heads) on the peg board wall waiting for customers to pick them up. In one corner is a wooden crate the size of a picnic table holding a moose head, antlers and all. In another corner is a neat stack of recently finished bear-skin rugs with the heads.

Scattered around Dubowik’s shop in Nashua are works he’s done for himself over the years, from his early specimens – like fishers and foxes – to trophy whitetail heads. On one wall is a wide collection of fish he’s preserved: big largemouths, northern pike, pickerel, brook trout and smallmouths.

Some of the displays at a taxidermist’s shop become part of the collection when the customer – for lack of money or whatever – never picks up his mount. But most customers can’t wait.

No wonder there’s usually a cordless phone handy in the taxidermist’s shop. When it rings, it’s someone checking prices, making arrangements for pickup or drop-off, or wondering when a mount will be ready. “Never bug your taxidermist,” Verville suggests.

And then there’s the smells of a taxidermist studio. No, it’s not the smell of



The taxidermist’s skill is tested by delicate work around his subjects’ mouths, ears, nose and eyes. This wild sports a freshly painted mouth.

rotting flesh; a taxidermist makes sure nothing rots. Sometimes it’s the smell of Bondo and hair spray. Sometimes it’s the smell of Borax.

Taxidermists who do their own tanning create a whole set of interesting smells. With the advent of improved chemicals in recent years, the tanning process has become less stinky and safer for the taxidermist.

Some taxidermists, such as Verville, insist on sending their customers’ skins to commercial tanneries or furriers. The advantage is that they have great confidence in the tanners’ abilities. The disadvantage is that the turnaround time is

much longer than that of a taxidermist who does the tanning.

Dubowik and others, however, swear by doing their own tanning. Aside from the quicker results, they claim to have more control over the processes.

And tanning is a key part of taxidermy. Done right, the mounted animal’s skin looks shiny and real for many, many decades. Done wrong, a mount looks terrible. A poorly preserved skin can also quickly lose its hair or get eaten by moth larvae and other pests.

The Taxidermist’s Rhythm

Full-time taxidermists have a nonstop and ever-changing rhythm to their work, no matter what the season. Fish – for the taxidermists who prepare them – come in spring and summer. Deer skins and black bear start coming in September. By November, the deer are coming in at full pace – along with the ducks and occasional small game. Throughout winter and spring, the taxidermist is catching up.

“There’s always something going on,” Verville says. “Unless you’re here all the time it’s hard to appreciate the amount of work and hours that goes into it. Just one turkey – there’s about three full days that goes into one turkey. It takes hours to comb a turkey’s feathers.”

Verville’s lack of slow time comes in part from his work on exotic big game. He’s done musk ox, wolverine, a Bengal tiger, African sable, antelope, zebra, lynx, mountain lion, Kodiak bears...the list goes on. He’s done some animals he’s never heard

of until the hunter delivered it. It's a job that forces you to learn about wildlife.

"The work is all in how you pace the tasks," says Dubowik, who's worked full time for nine years. "You put one skin in a solution, you go on to another task. You do that, then you take the skin out and dry it."

Taxidermists have their own specialties. One taxidermist, Loren Nash of Berlin, does a lot of roadkill animals, including deer, bear, fox, coyotes and many others. Nash is also known for doing mounts that are ... well, a bit off the wall. He's planning an outdoor display depicting a moose that's been struck by a vehicle.

After he gets hold of an appropriately crushed vehicle – or dents it himself – he plans to attach a full-size mounted moose to the car's roof. Nash wants to haul the vehicle/moose combo around to inform people about driving safely in moose country. The display, he says, will be dramatic, but tasteful.

Merrimack taxidermist Jeanne Pratt's specialty is birds. Many are nongame, roadkill birds that she does for educational facilities, including New Hampshire Fish and Game, Audubon Society of New Hampshire and the Beaver Brook Association. She's done hummingbirds, owls, parrots, warblers, blue jays, finches, a chicken (with eggs!) and all sorts of waterfowl.

"A lot of taxidermists get aggravated by birds," Pratt says. "Because of their shapes, it's hard to get accurate anatomy of birds. Also, their skin is very thin and mistakes show up easily."

Of the 43 commercial taxidermists in the state, Pratt is among four that are women. She's had the occasional caller who's surprised when her husband hands the phone over to the taxidermist. In the end, the client has to be pleased with the results, no matter if the taxidermist is a man or woman.

From Tanning to Finishing Touches

The taxidermy process can vary greatly, depending on the animal. And different taxidermists have their own varying styles and order of doing things.

For deer, bear and other mammals, it starts



Jeanne Pratt adds the finishing touches to a pair of newly mounted wood ducks.

with the tanning – converting the coat into leather. With the hunter's help, the taxidermist has to choose a manikin that matches the specimen. That's a decision that involves the specimen's pose, size and other characteristics.

The taxidermist then has to attach the antlers and eyes to the manikin. After being tanned, the skin has to be softened in a mixture of water and a mildew resistant agent. Then the taxidermist maneuvers the skin onto the manikin – with lots of adjusting – and glues it in place to look lifelike. One of the hardest jobs for a taxidermist is installing the eyes, ears,

mouth, nose and antlers.

Then the taxidermist sews the incision in the skin closed, brushes the hair and lets the mount dry. After the mount has dried thoroughly, he starts the finishing process, like restoring the color of the nose, eyelids and other parts and rebuilding shrunken areas with wax or sculpting compounds.

For fish, the taxidermy process is a lot trickier and involves more artistic talent.

There are two basic kinds of fish taxidermy nowadays: skin mounts (preserving the fish's actual skin and mounting it over a form) and replicas made of plastic, fiberglass or a combination.

Bass, crappie and other warmwater fish are good to preserve as skin mounts because they have tough skins, big scales and aren't especially greasy. Coldwater fish, such as trout and salmon, are more difficult because they have smooth, fine scales and thin, oily skins. Among the taxidermist's challenges is making sure the final mount is smooth, with no lumps underneath,

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Fish mounts – both composite replicas and those using the actual skin – require careful work and delicate painting. Jim Dubowik of Nashua uses an airbrush to finish up this trophy brook trout.



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It takes a lot of time, patience and skill for a taxidermist to create a realistic-looking deer-head mount. Experience has taught Leon Verville of Loudon that there are many wrong ways and a few right ways to do it.

and that there is no spoilage or grease bleeding through the skin. The taxidermist, or another artist, still has to paint the skin mount to restore the fish's actual color.

Because creating realistic, long-lasting skin-mounted fish can be time-consuming and expensive, a growing number of taxidermists and their clients are using replicas, especially for saltwater trophies.

Although reproductions have nothing of your actual fish in them, it almost doesn't matter. Taxidermy supply companies have a huge variety of reproductions – or blanks – to match your fish. For instance, one company offers five different weight choices for a 24-inch largemouth bass, including pot-belly. Just specify the weight, length, girth and pose you want and the taxidermist can order it – or something pretty darn close.


Reproductions all require painting and usually require assembly of fins. With a good paint job, it's hard to tell the difference between a replica and the real thing.

Fish that are caught and released make excellent candidates for replicas.

Ducks, wild turkeys and other birds offer a whole bunch of challenges, mostly because the skin is so darned thin (Verville says it's like Saran Wrap). For birds, much of the important work is in the hunter's hands, taking care not to shoot it full of holes and prepare it for the taxidermist.

Some birds are treated just like any other game animal – the taxidermist carefully removes the skin, preserves it, then mounts it on the skull or a form. The work is done very carefully with lots of TLC to not damage the feathers or skin.

Wild turkeys, however, are different. Their heads and necks are featherless, full of bumps and ripples. Taxidermists usually send the heads off to be freeze-dried in a form, with artificial eyes installed during the process. By early summer, a delivery truck usually drops off a box of freeze-dried turkey heads to Verville's shop.

Some of the taxidermists' processes are too much of a secret to reveal here. Taxidermists are like magicians in some respects. They show you some cool stuff, but they don't always want to tell you how it's done. Fair enough. 

The Taxidermist's List of Dos and Don'ts

Tips for the hunter in preparing game and fish specimens for the taxidermist:

Game Heads:

- Don't cut the throat;
- Don't haul it with a rope;
- Don't punch holes through ears for tags;
- Cut up from under hide to avoid cutting the hair;
- Peel skin down the neck;
- Avoid water or prolonged exposure to heat or sunlight;
- Don't hang a deer by the back legs and wash out the carcass. Just wipe it out as best as you can and let it dry.
- Freeze or deliver to the taxidermist as soon as possible. Warm weather will quickly ruin skin;
- Leave enough hide or skin for the taxidermist (some taxidermists prefer the whole hide);
- With bear, use a game bag and pour black pepper in the cavity to keep flies out. When you get home, put frozen jugs in the cavity.

Ducks/Birds:

- Don't mount a duck that's immature or too heavily shot – some things may not be worth mounting;
- Dry the specimen with paper towels;
- Plug holes, nostrils and throat with tissue;
- Don't get blood on the feathers;
- Don't freeze the bird in plastic – wrap it in paper;
- Deliver to a taxidermist as soon as possible.

Fish:

- Don't cut, clean or skin it;
- Plug mouth with cotton or tissue;
- Wrap entire fish in a wet towel and put it in the freezer;
- Take it to the taxidermist as soon as possible;
- Some taxidermists suggest coating the specimen with borax.

Other tips:

- When in doubt, call a taxidermist for instructions;
- When bringing game to a taxidermist for mounting, bring applicable tags, permits and licenses;
- Treat your game with respect – any game;
- Handle your game carefully;
- Fresh specimens make the best mounts;
- It's not always legal to keep roadkill. Check with your local conservation officer;
- Fur-bearing animals have to be tagged by a conservation officer before being brought to a taxidermist or furrier.

For a list of licensed New Hampshire taxidermists, visit www.wildlife.state.nh.us