

So you've finally bagged that big buck or caught the fish of a lifetime. What do you do next? You find a taxidermist.

One of the most well-known and respected taxidermists in our area is Dale Horton who owns Back Country Taxidermy in Paddock Lake.

Horton has been a fulltime taxidermist for 22 years and has been running his business out of the Paddock Lake Sporting Goods store for those 22 years. Before that, he ran his business part-time out of his home on the family's farm.

Horton got his start back when he was about 9 yrs old when he took a correspondence course from the Northwestern School of Taxidermy. He used to practice on pigeons that his brother had shot for him. Those pigeons were just the start for what would become Horton's fulltime "gig".

"Once I got out of high school, I went to a technical college for taxidermy and then started in the business part-time"; said Horton.

The jump into fulltime taxidermy came when Horton was approached by Darrell Highland to join the bait and tackle store than Highland was going to build on Highway 50 in Paddock Lake.

Horton actually assisted in some of the construction of the actual store and was able to open his shop in the back part of it where it still resides today.

Positive word of mouth has been the driver that has built Horton's business over the years and it keeps him very busy even today. A visit to his work shop confirmed that many people trust Horton to work on their trophy.

"Some of my customers have been with me since my part-time days"; said Horton.

For many people, there is probably some misconception of what an animal mount really is. While pretty much everything you see on the outside (besides the eyes) is real, it's the inside that is "non-organic".

Except for small animals and birds which can be freeze dried and therefore maintain their own skeleton, the procedure for say a deer or bear, is to take the skin off the animal and apply it onto a Styrofoam form called a mold. Of course as simple as that sounds, there are a lot more steps than that to the process and it takes a bit of science and art to come out with a good looking re-creation that will hold up over time.

When a customer first brings in an animal like a deer to be mounted, Horton will ask the customer a number of questions to figure out what kind of mounting he/she will prefer. He will then tag the animal with an invoice number so it can be tracked through the process.

He will then take careful measurements of the animal to ensure that he is able to choose the proper sized mold to closely re-create the animal.

Horton next skins the animal including the removal of the skin from the head and then removes the horns if it's a buck. The skin is placed in a bag marked with the invoice number and is put into a freezer until it is time for him to actual begin the mounting work.

When that time comes, he with then thaw the skin and begin the tanning process which is performed to keep the skin from deteriorating and to minimize the amount of shrinking.

The first step involves running the skin through a fleshing process which thins the hide and removes any of the muscle that is still attached.

After that, Horton will heavily salt the hide, wash it and then put into a pickling solution for 48 hours. He will then put it into a neutralizing bath and then perform a final fleshing.

After that is completed he will place the hide into a tan bath for 24 hrs and then will oil the hide which keeps the skin pliable. Many times he will wash the hide one more time to try and make sure all the salt is removed.

From start to finish, the tanning process takes about 1 week.

Once the tanning is done he applies the hide to the mold while the skin is still wet. The hide is affixed to the mold using special glue. The goal in the process is to make sure the hide is securely glued to the mold and not to have any drumming which is where air is trapped between the hide and the mold.

The synthetic eyes are attached to the mold before the skin is applied. If it's a buck, the horns are also attached at some point before the hide is finished being applied.

When it comes to advice on what hunters should do when they do bag that trophy, the first thing Horton recommends is when dragging your deer out of the woods you should avoid using a rope as this can damage the fur. Also, keep the shoulders and brisket off the ground when dragging. If available, using a device such as a wheel barrel to carry the deer to prevent damage to the animal. Horton recommends that hunters calls their taxidermist before they cape their deer.

I figured being in the business for over 22 years that Horton would have some interesting stories of strange things people wanted to have made into a mount. Indeed he has with possibly the strangest being a gentleman who wanted three of his "pets" mounted. These pets turned out to be 3 rats. Though Horton does not normally work on pets, he obliged and treated them just as when someone entrusts him with a trophy.

"It comes down to making the finished product look good. You want people to be happy with the product"; Horton said.

I guess that applies to rats as well as a trophy buck

You can contact Dale Horton of Back Country Taxidermy at (262) 843-2937.

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